

The Clown by **jeromevaleska**

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Summary: You're having recurring dreams of a malevolent clown, and you don't have the slightest idea why. You believe he's a figment of your imagination, a character in your nightmares, but you discover he's very much real at a Halloween party your friend is throwing.

1. The Clown

You were running. You ran as fast as your bare feet could take you through the vast woods in the middle of the night. The moon barely gave any light through the open patches of trees. You were breathing heavily, your heart thumping, blood pulsing in your ears. You could hardly see through the stream of tears falling from your eyes that left streaks on your dirty face.

You could hear the clown behind you, ever so close on your tail. You could hear the amused huffs, the larger soled feet crushing the sticks and greens as it chased after you. You suddenly tripped and crawled forward till you were up and running again. Your lungs hurt from the cold rush of air hitting you as you panted. You were surrounded by only the woods and darkness, and it felt as if they were closing in on you.

Your body was on fire, your legs were shaking, and you didn't think that you could take another step. You wanted to run, but all you could do now was stumble. When you finally reached what looked like some kind of path, your feet bloody and numb, you gave yourself a moment to take in deep gulps of the cold, clear air.

You could almost feel the fiery breath on the back of your neck; you were terrified of turning around and glancing behind you. But you had to look, you had to know how close he was. And sure enough, the mere sight of him was all it took to sap the strength from your limbs. You turned and saw yellow eyes, eyes the color of sulfur. They gleamed in the darkness as the clown behind you lowered his head and charged, aiming those razor-sharp claws directly at you before they hauled you backwards.

You bolted upright in bed, not sure of how long you were asleep. Your heart was pounding and you tried to catch your breath as your wide eyes looked about the room, every limb had become tangled in the sheets while you slept. You were drenched in cold sweat as you sighed in shaky relief. Your abdomen ached and your throat felt dry. You grabbed the glass of water on your nightstand and chugged it, waiting for your nerves to settle. You were in your bedroom, safe.

Slowly, your breathing returned to normal and the irrational terror of your nightmare subsided, though the discomfort in your abdomen remained.

It was that same damn clown showing up in your dreams again. No, it was more of a nightmare, there wasn't any other word to describe it. This had been occurring for God knows how long now. Every night you would see him. The clown. You believed you would have gotten used to it by now, but his unpredictable ways of frightening you didn't make that easy. You knew it had to mean something, you just didn't understand what exactly. They felt too real, far too unsettling. But it had to be a figment of your imagination... right?

You were restless most nights, sometimes unable to catch a wink of sleep because he simply would not permit it without visiting you in some twisted way.

You turned back to your nightstand to grab your cellphone after taking a moment to calm yourself, only to find several missed calls as well as several text messages from your best friend. You must have lost track of time. You were supposed to do your homework but of course you were only able to answer one question before you drifted off to sleep. This damn clown was fucking around with your sleep schedule, there was no reason for you to be taking a nap an hour before her big Halloween party.

You weren't in a party mood whatsoever, hell you weren't up for much these days, and the bags under your eyes was proof enough but of course your friend couldn't take the hint. She wasn't going to stop nagging you until you gave her an answer and the only answer she deemed acceptable would be an enthusiastic 'yes'.

Just when you were about to return one of her numerous phone calls, your phone obnoxiously rang once again, and with a sigh you answered.

"Hello?" you said groggily.

"It's almost 7pm! You're on your way right? Please tell me you are because I don't want to be around all these cool people without you! I need my ride or die! You should be done with your homework

already. And you were supposed to help me decorate the place and get the snacks ready! I had to ask Jessica because you've been ignoring my calls and you know how I feel about her! But turns out she's more reliable than you right now. You're usually early, you should be here already!" she babbled, so much so that you couldn't make out everything she was saying, mostly because you were already exhausted and weren't willing to give the effort to understand.

"Okay, okay, I hear you, Hanna. Calm down I'll be there, I just need to get dressed real quick," you reassured, knowing it was best to keep your cool when she started panicking like this.

"You're not even ready? Oh my god, hurry up! Please don't ever do this to me again," she complained. "I'm going to hang up now so you can get ready, see you soon."

After the phone call ended, you heaved a dramatic sigh before throwing your head back on the bed in annoyance. It was going to be a long day.

Dead leaves fell silently to the ground below; colors of golden yellow and crimson red detached from the branches of trees that covered the city streets. The small feet of gleeful children stepped on the lifeless foliage that covered the area with little care as they ran along the sidewalks with their buckets waiting to be filled with candy, giggling with joy under the ghostly light of a full moon.

A cold wind brushed against your face as the dusk air was sinking into a more chilling temperature. It was a short journey to your friend's place and the glow in the dark skeletons amid the leering jack-o'-lanterns of the suburban neighborhood did little to get you in the Halloween spirit. You could hear the house booming with music and the stomping of people's feet as they danced. You felt utterly ridiculous as you contemplated whether or not you should go inside. On one hand, you were freezing, a skintight dress did nothing to block out the cold October air, and you knew that Hanna's home would provide the warmth you craved. But on the other hand, you didn't want to be here at all. You would have preferred hanging out with your friend, just you and her, watching bad horror movies, instead of being in a setting where you had to interact with a bunch

of people you had no interest in knowing. If you left now, you could always tell her that you had come down with some kind of sickness, which wouldn't entirely be a lie...

You were still deliberating on which excuse to use as you turned from the door to begin the short walk back to your car. Unfortunately, you were instantly halted in your tracks as you heard the door to your friend's house open. Well, shit.

"Hey! You made it, finally!" Hanna said, a little too enthusiastically as she spun around in excitement; only to furrow her brows upon seeing your dress. "You're kidding me, right?"

You frowned as she leaned against the door, tilting her head to the side as she examined you. "Where's your costume at?"

"What do you mean? I'm wearing one," you answered dryly.

You were wearing a strapless lace black dress with a flowy skirt that was cut just above your knees with a black tail attached to it and a black cat ears headband as well as whiskers painted on your cheeks.

"I'm kidding, silly! I mean you kind of half-assed it, because there's like twenty girls here with the same costume, but it'll do!" she giggled with a wide smile on her face as you entered the colorful, loud party. "It's pretty slutty, but hey nothing wrong with that! Dudes love a slutty costume."

"Thanks for slut-shaming me. And you don't think yours is slutty in the slightest?" you joked as your eyes flicked up and down, taking in the details of her Red Riding Hood outfit and how her skirt flared out as she spun on the spot. She wore a red sleeved dress with a low neckline and adorned it with a white lacy apron, a red hooded cloak, and red high heels. She even had a wicker basket to top it all off.

"What are you talking about? It's cute and innocent! Guys like that too, you know! You were supposed to be my Big Bad Wolf! That way I could be the hot one," she teased with a playful giggle.

"Haha, very funny, well I'm gonna go get a drink," you told her and she nodded her head in response before mouthing the words 'hurry

back'.

You bobbed through the crowd of dancers in an effort to make your way to the side of the room. There was too many people here, with the key attributes of their costumes being either skimpiness or ridiculousness. But maybe you needed this; a distraction. Distractions were good. The sounds of people laughing and talking and the deafening pop music was somewhat comforting because it was far too loud to hear yourself think, and that was the last thing you wanted to do. It was better to be surrounded by people than be by yourself. And most importantly, you were safe here. Safe from the clown that continued to endlessly plague your dreams.

You took a moment to appreciate the tacky Halloween decor and the numerous jack-o'-lanterns of every shape and size adorning the floor, their carved faces flickering in the darkened room. Black and orange crepe paper hung creatively from the ceiling and walls. Towards the back of the room and behind the swarming dance floor, you could just make out the werewolf costumed DJ and his sound system. Furry spiders and bats floated down from the ceiling along with gauzy spider webs draped everywhere imaginable, and there was a rotating disco ball with sparkling lights bouncing off the walls.

A buffet table ran along one side of the room, the punch bowl surrounded by a slight haze of smoke, which you immediately ran to. You poured yourself a cup of punch and merely watched everyone, far too exhausted to join the crowd. You swayed slightly to the music to act like you were into it. Various guys in costume, some not, asked you to dance and some offered you drinks. You politely turned each of them down. It wasn't just that they didn't have any charisma to get your attention, but you weren't in the mood to entertain them. You hardly had the energy to talk to any of your friends, let alone even be here in the first place, so you figured it was best not to waste your time.

You stood in a corner and sipped your punch, and you absently figured that Hanna was probably looking for you by now. You grabbed a piece of candy in one of the buckets filled with sweets and just when you were about to walk away a white gloved hand grabbed your shoulder and turned you around to face them. You jerked a bit, slightly taken aback from the sudden contact, and your eyes finally

met the stranger's face. It was your ex.

"Please tell me someone spiked the drinks," your ex commented with a long sigh as he made his way next to you.

"There's already alcohol in them. It's a shame though, I was looking forward to spiking the punch," you grinned and pulled out a flask that you had stuffed in your purse. You chuckled when you saw his Dracula costume, replete with a floor-length midnight black cape, white ruffled shirt, wine-red velveteen waistcoat and black trousers, along with white fangs in his mouth.

He held up his red cup. "Spike mine. I don't think I'm drunk enough to endure Amy's come-ons without running away screaming."

You topped up his drink and then did the same to your own for good measure. "That girl sure is persistent, I'll give her that," you added, spotting her across the dance floor in a frilly white, glittery angel costume.

"Yeah it's a miracle I was able to slip away and find you here," he laughed before taking another drink. "By the way, you look really hot as a cat," he told you with a flirtatious smile. You two weren't together anymore, but still occasionally flirted with one another because you were on such good terms.

"Thanks, I would say the same about you, but Dracula is really lame," you teased.

"Rude much. Should I have dressed as a clown? Would you have liked that more?" he joked, and your eyes widened just from hearing that word. It was just a stupid joke but now the clown crossed your mind again.

"No, that would have been way worse actually, don't ever do that by the way," you warned with a frown before quickly changing the subject. "Anyways, instead of standing around like losers, do you want to have some fun?" you suggested with a smile.

Yeah, fun. That's the perfect distraction. You don't have time to think about frustrating shit you can't fix when you're having fun.

You gulped down more of your drink but then you saw it. You swallowed hard. An eerie feeling washed over you once your eyes met a single red balloon floating amidst the dance floor that was once swarmed with people, but the surrounding space around it was oddly cleared. You couldn't keep your eyes off the balloon as it slowly floated towards a corridor. Your ex was trying to engage in conversation with you, but it fell on deaf ears. Suddenly you couldn't hear the booming music anymore or see anything other than the stray balloon, it was like a strange blanket of silence had settled over the area upon its arrival.

You dropped your cup and the drink instantly spilled on the floor. You didn't understand why but you felt compelled to follow wherever it strayed off to. There was nothing you wanted more than to see where it was headed, like it was the only thing that mattered.

You ran off without saying another word to your ex.

"So I guess that's a no? Am I that bad of a dancer?" he called out, but it was too late, you were already out of sight.

The balloon continued down the corridor and then another before it reached the opened front door. It wandered off into the dark woods and you followed closely behind. Once it left the building, it started floating faster, much to your dismay.

The full moon was suspended in the dark blue sky, lighting the way through the woods as you ran through the familiar path between the trees. You were swift and light on your feet, eyes focusing only on the bright red balloon. The crunching of autumn's leaves under your shoes seemed to echo in the woods like a siren's call, betraying your position with every step. The woods were nothing like this when you were a child, so ominous and foreboding. You sniffed the air suspiciously. There was a strange odor abound.

Now you were afraid. Why were you even out here in the first place?

You turned back to where you had come from, but there were too many trees obscuring the path. Thinner branches swayed lightly in the wind, as if waving to taunt you, while the thick ones were gnarled into menacing shapes. They were casting strange shadows on

the ground that made you feel a sense of dread. You looked ahead hesitantly. There was a bizarre aura as the trees got thicker. Almost as though you were being watched. If you squinted, it seemed like hooded figures sat far, far ahead. And did you hear whispers now?

Your head turned swiftly at the murmurs, and you tripped over a thick root, landing you on your hands. You felt a thick liquid coat your costume and the foul smell made your nose scrunch. Slowly you stood and examined yourself. Your dress was drenched in blood.

You covered your mouth, to stifle your scream once your eyes darted back to the ground that was now soaked with a wide layer of blood that seemed to stretch all the way back to Hanna's house. Your stomach was in knots, and you were certain by now that your body was covered in goosebumps.

When you looked back up, you spotted the balloon hovering in a small clearing in the woods. The hairs on the back of your neck raised in alarm, you thought you had lost track of it but it appeared to come to a halt.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, you stood in front of the balloon as it started to lift higher.

Until it finally popped.

The balloon was gone and now there was a tall clown in its place.

It was the same clown in your nightmares.

Words refused to surface in your brain as you drew up a blank, mouth agape as you took in the fact that he is actually standing in front of you. The clown. You thought you would only ever see him when you were sleeping. You were convinced you must have fallen asleep back at the party. He couldn't be here. This couldn't be real. There was no way. You were peering at him with equal parts curiosity and fear. And he was grinning wide in amusement.

You couldn't stop analyzing every part of his appearance because you had to be sure he matched the description of the one in your dreams. His face was pale white with tufts of orange hair on either side of his

head as well as the top, full lips that seemed to be coated with red lipstick, glistening blue irises that seemed almost friendly at first glance, but then you remembered they weren't always that color. He was wearing a baggy gray costume that resembled a worn-out dress with bright red button-like pompoms and white clad gloves along with his brown pointed shoes. You were sure every detail was to the letter.

"Why hello there, Y/N!" he broke the silence with what he probably thought was a warm welcome, the sound sending a shuddering chill down your spine.

You didn't say anything, just merely stared at him, and swallowed nervously. You wanted to run and never look back but your body betrayed you because it was still in shock.

"Were you looking for this?" he questioned in a faux friendly tone, and then all of a sudden, he was holding another red balloon by the string between his fingers. He leaned over as he held it out for you to take. "You went all the way out here just to get it. Wouldn't want you to get lost, that sure would be a shame."

You were reluctant to take it, but he leaned closer and persistently kept it within your grasp.

"C'mon, take it, don't be shy now," he insisted. His smile grew wider once you reached the balloon and accepted it. You expected to be hauled to the ground and seized away violently as you thrashed about trying to escape his strong hold, like what would regularly happen in your nightmares. But it didn't. No, maybe he was waiting for the right moment.

"But I thought it popped," you murmured as your shaky hand held onto the string.

"It must be your lucky day because I always carry balloons with me, you came to the right place," he told you with a chuckle.

"Who are you?" you asked point-blank.

"Ah, how rude of me! I didn't introduce myself. I'm Pennywise,

Pennywise the dancing clown!" he announced, bowing afterwards as if he just finished performing an act at the circus.

"What... what are you doing here?" you managed despite the hammering of your heart against your rib cage.

"I wanted to join the party, it looks like a lot of fun! A party isn't complete without a clown, wouldn't you agree? That's like the cherry on top! So, won't you invite me in?" he asked with a sinister smile playing on his lips.

"I-I have to get back now. My friends are probably looking for me," you replied shakily, ignoring his offer.

"Such a pity. And we were just getting to know each other!" he said, his voice deep and rumbling. "Well then, until next time."

"Thank god, I finally found you! What the hell are you doing out in the woods for? Why aren't you at the party? I've been looking for you for God knows how long!" Hanna called out from behind you with a bright flashlight in her hand as she walked towards you with a frown marring her features.

"Hanna, let's get out of here, now," you begged and sprinted over to her.

"Are you okay? You shouldn't be out here, there's like dog shit everywhere and rats with rabies, you're going to get your costume dirty! We're supposed to be having fun," she complained, shaking her head in disapproval.

"There's a fucking clown out here!" you told her as you grabbed her hand and started running off with her, but she had trouble keeping up and stopped in her tracks so you would have to as well.

"What the hell are you talking about? What clown?" she asked, clearly confused. She looked about the woods before turning back to you. And when you turned back, you could still see the clown. There was a maniacal smile stretched across his face. You didn't have the balloon anymore. It was in his hand.

"There's a clown – I saw him, okay? Please believe me, there was this

clown that I've been seeing in my nightmares. They are recurring nightmares that just won't fucking stop and he was standing there. He's still standing there! Right there! With a balloon! Can't you see him?" you pointed in Pennywise's direction, who was still devilishly grinning. "We have to go now!" you implored and gripped onto her hand as tightly as you could without hurting her.

"There is no clown. I seriously have no idea what you're talking about! Was your drink spiked with something other than alcohol? Or have you just lost it?" she accused.

You weren't crazy. You didn't want to think of yourself as being crazy. No, he really was there. You knew for a fact that he wasn't a figment of your imagination.

"Can't you see the blood on my dress?" you quavered, gesturing your other hand at your blood-soaked dress.

"I don't see anything. There's nothing there. It looks as good as new!" she told you, her tone making you feel like you were completely bonkers. "You're starting to freak me out."

"Let's go back, I just wanna go back," you repeated. It was futile. She couldn't see him, and apparently anything he left behind. Maybe your mind was playing tricks on you. No, you refused to believe that. Everything felt so real. But there's no way someone had that kind of control, that kind of power.

You continued to run and she allowed you this time. "I mean if you say you see it, I believe you. I just don't see it, or have any idea what the hell you're talking about," she attempted to reassure you. There was an uncomfortable silence for a short while on the way back, neither one of you really knew what to say to the other. She didn't believe you and you didn't know how to convince her that it was true when there wasn't any proof. She finally said, "By the way, I really fucking hate clowns."

"Me too..." you agreed.

Your eyes darted back again to the spot he was standing at when you came face to face with him. He was still there.

"Until next time!" Pennywise croaked, waving goodbye to you. "Until next time..."

And with a final smile, he vanished into the woods.

2. Killer Party

You were guided back into the party by your best friend who had a look of sympathy on her face, but it wasn't the comforting kind, it was more like 'I think you're totally insane but I don't want to make you feel worse about the situation' kind of look. It didn't make you feel any better. Though, it wasn't like you could blame her. She didn't see him. She didn't hear him. She couldn't see the blood on your body. It all felt like a cruel, sick joke. You wished it was just a dream because then at least your friends wouldn't have seen you acting like a crazy person. It was Halloween. You were supposed to be having fun.

Your hands were shaking rapidly, and you knew you were on the verge of a mental breakdown. You could still feel the blood, you could still smell how foul it was. You wanted to rip the ugly dress off and never see it again.

Hanna caressed your back lovingly in an attempt to comfort you until you two came back into the bustling party. She was strangely quiet.

Maybe what happened in the woods was just some twisted prank. Maybe it was just a clown that happened to look like the one in your dreams, maybe it wasn't really him. Maybe it was just some asshole thinking he was funny, maybe—

"Do you want to go back home?" Hanna asked suddenly after being silent for far too long, a frown stuck on her face. "You look too freaked out to be here. I can take you back if you want," she offered somewhat reluctantly, because you knew that she didn't want to leave the party. "I think you need to get some rest."

"No, I'm fine," you told her, and your tone did little to convince her that you were telling the truth. "I don't really want to be by myself tonight. We're supposed to have a good time, remember?" you smiled weakly.

You decided it was better to stay. He couldn't get you here, not when you were surrounded by walls and people. You just had to remind yourself not to chase any more stray balloons.

"I know but you don't have to stay, I don't want you to feel like you have to," she explained.

"I'm seriously fine. Don't be such a worrywart. I just want to forget about what happened, okay? Can we drop it?" you asked, hoping that she would just let it go.

"Okay, but just let me know if you change your mind," she reminded you.

"Thanks," you replied with a small smile. "I'm just gonna use the bathroom real quick, I'll be back," you told her and she simply nodded her head in response. You made your way through the crowd and once you were out of her peripheral vision you rushed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind you.

You grabbed a towel and turned on the sink faucet to damp it quickly. You patted your dress down with the towel, trying to rid of as much blood as you could without smearing it too much. You couldn't stand the smell. Once you were finished you threw the towel aside and washed your hands quickly, feeling sick to your stomach as you watched hues of red mix with the water.

You stood before the mirror when you heard a soft noise behind you, almost like the rustling of fabric, but when you turned around no one was there. You froze and watched the mirror carefully, and there was movement behind you. With a slight shrug, you reached into the bathroom cabinet to fix your hair. It wasn't looking as put together as it was when you were arrived here, and just as you reached your hand out to grab a hair brush, you heard an eerie whisper of your name in your ears.

A chill shivered its way down your spine and the hair brush falls from your hand as your grip goes slack. You turned, slowly backing up against the wall as you peered around the room. You noticed the chandelier above you was swinging ever so slightly, flickering every now and then. "Who's there?" you called, looking about your surroundings.

The room was empty and you scrubbed at your eyes, then shook your head slightly. You hadn't gotten any sleep for the past few weeks.

You were just tired. You had to convince yourself that's all it was.

You were bending down to rummage through the cabinet when there was a creak above you. There was something like a hard tug against the straps of your dress and you tripped back over your feet as you lost your balance, just as the chandelier crashed to the ground a mere hair's breadth from where you were standing. The room was very dim now. Your whole body flinched.

Why was this happening? You were sure that had been hung up for years and now suddenly it drops?

You stared at the fallen object, breath suddenly hard to catch, and scrambled back as best as you could on quivering legs. A hand drifted up to rub your neck, and you breathed out shakily when it doesn't seem to have left a mark.

Your gaze drifted over the room again, almost completing a scan when a darkness catches your attention from the far corner of the ceiling. There was some sort of shadow suspended there, and it drifted slowly towards you where you were standing by the mirror. It was dark, so maybe you were just seeing things but you could tell there was a darkness that didn't belong.

You closed your eyes, took a deep breath, and moved away quickly, cautiously avoiding looking towards the corner. You calmly and surely made your way back out of the bathroom before closing the door quietly behind yourself. You were going to be okay. You just had to get back to the party now. Everything was going to be okay.

You wandered down the dark narrow hall. The house was overwhelmingly filled with gloom. You didn't hear the loud music anymore. You didn't hear people chattering. You didn't see the disco lights bouncing off the walls. It was deadly silent. There was only a faint light coming from the end of the corridor but even then it was hardly anything.

Oh no, were you dreaming again?

You sprinted over to one of the rooms, you needed to find someone; anyone. You opened the door to Hanna's room and found someone

was sleeping on her bed with rustled sheets over their body. You walked over with careful footsteps, and discovered that it was a young man. There was a pillow covering his face. As you had stepped closer, your heart plummeted, body icing over. His chest wasn't raising and falling. He wasn't breathing. You rushed over, ripping the pillow away from him. You gripped his wrist, checking for a pulse. There was none to be found. Your eyes filled with tears when you looked at his young face and dead eyes. Who could have done this?

You wanted to scream, scream for help but you found that you couldn't even speak, and somehow you knew that even if you did, no help would come. You couldn't stay here. You had to find everyone else. You had to find your friends.

You figured someone had to be scrounging around in the kitchen. You were half right. You found a young girl sprawled out on the table, head turned to you with wide opened eyes. You didn't have to enter the kitchen very far to notice the dark bruises circling her throat. You fled from the kitchen and headed down the hallway the opposite direction of the way you had come, swallowing back against the nausea creeping into your throat.

They were all dead. They were all dead and now you were next. He was going to get you. No, no, no, this couldn't be happening, not now.

The werewolf costumed DJ had been next, face down in the hallway with a knife in his back. Blood spread from the wound outward, soaking the back of his costume. You had to cover your mouth to keep yourself from crying out. You choked back on your sobs and hoped with everything you had that you would find somebody alive.

Then suddenly, you heard somebody screaming. It was a shrill, desperate sort of noise. It sounded like a woman. The sound scratched at the thin air around you, and it kept going, louder like the person was stumbling, crawling towards you.

You moved frantically in search of another living soul roaming the building.

You had tore down the hallway, checking inside rooms as you went.

The hallway opened up into the living room. The entire place was trashed, tables knocked over, bodies littering the floor, blood splattered and covered the walls, there wasn't a little thing that wasn't broken or ruined in one way or another. There was so many dead bodies. It was a massacre. Amy had been the only occupant of the room. She was sitting on the couch, facing away from you, only the back of her head visible.

"Amy?" you had called out as you slowly moved further into the room, afraid of what you would find once you rounded the couch.

No reply. Your heart sank. The room was filled with the scent of iron. Blood. Your eyes drifted shut and you took a much needed breath as you reached the moment of truth. Opening your eyes, you let out a loud gasp and jumped a step back. Amy's chin was resting on her chest. Blood soaked the entire front of her body and her flashy Angel costume was completely ruined. Her throat had been slit. Tears streamed down your face as you let out a strangled sob, hope of finding anyone alive slowly slipping through your fingers.

You found another body in the closet. The young man was dressed in a police uniform and he had been stabbed in the chest, blood drenching the entirety of his costume, his eyes wide with horror. You stayed in the room long enough to count the wounds before leaving. There had been eight.

Jessica was discovered in the room next door to Hanna's. It was a bedroom. She was slumped over a desk on a chair, her eyes completely lifeless and face blood-stained. The back of her head had been bashed in.

That brought you to now, fighting your hysteria. Who would you find next? How brutal would it be? Who was doing this?

You tripped over a rug as you continued down the hall, still checking rooms along your way. You didn't call out in case the killer was near you. You didn't want to draw attention to your location.

You knew your way around because this was your friend's place, you had been here a million times. You knew which rooms you had checked and what areas had yet to be searched. There was still places

to look. There had to be someone.

Glancing over the balcony, you saw two bodies strewn out at the foot of the stairs. Wasting no time, you sprinted to the top of the stairs and scrambled down to them. You were moving urgently in hopes of finding them still alive. Their hands were bound behind them and they were gagged. It was a couple dressed as Bonnie and Clyde. They had been pushed down the stairs. No way they could have survived that. You were sure their legs and necks were broken once you spotted the crooked angles of their bodies.

Hope was fading fast. You didn't think you were going to make it out alive. He did this. The clown. This was his doing. He was going to get away with it. This was your worst nightmare. You were alone. Surrounded by death.

You glanced at the front door. Rain splattered against the windows, thunder rumbled in the distance. You could easily leave now. Just run out the front door and possibly get out alive while you were still breathing. Maybe others took the opportunity and were saved. You couldn't have been the only survivor.

No. You couldn't just leave them. You couldn't leave your friends.

You didn't want to assume everyone else was dead but the chances seemed bleak. You crept down the next hallway you came to, the fear of running into the clown building in the very core of your being.

Standing outside of the last door of the hall, you were overcome with a feeling of dread. You just knew in your bones you wouldn't like what you would find waiting for you on the other side. Your palms were sweating and your heart raced as you reached for the doorknob. It was the bathroom. What if something had happened after you left? You had to check.

You managed to assess the room before your nose picked up on a slight burning scent hanging in the air. A light humming filled the room. Then your eyes landed on the scene before you. Your eyes widened in horror and you gasped. You only took comfort in the fact that they had been together when it happened.

Twin sisters dressed as witches were in the large tub facing one another. The porcelain tub was filled to the brim with water. Your eyes followed the black electrical cord that ran from the outlet of the sink to connect to the hair dryer floating between the two occupants of the bathtub. You grimaced at the thought and sight. It couldn't have been a quick death. They must have suffered. Your heart was broken. You couldn't imagine how you would feel if something had happened to your little sister.

You pitched to the side, gagging, and nearly threw up in your mouth. Wiping your face with the back of your hand, tremors wracking your frame, you backed out of the room. You made your way down the staircase at the end of the hall that led to the garage. You didn't have to fully enter the room at the bottom of the stairs to see what had occurred within, didn't even have to be at the last step.

Cold sweat trickled down the nape of your neck. Each step echoed and created more fear to settle within your chest. The ragged breathing that escaped your lips was the only sound that rang in your ears. You gazed at the walls as you walked past, the grey walls covered in rust and blood.

There was definitely a struggle in this room. Broken glass was scattered upon the floor as well as a bloody knife. There was two brothers dressed as pirates, lying prone on the floor. The older one was on his back perpendicular to the staircase, head turned in the direction of it, though it was obvious what he had been looking at in his last moments. He had one hand on his abdomen, covering his wounds as his clothes seeped with crimson. His right hand was stretched towards the younger brother, palm up, in his futile attempt to reach him. The younger brother was a ways off of his right side, legs out behind him, like he had crawled on his stomach to his final spot. His arms were both torn off and he was bathing in a puddle of his own blood.

You allowed yourself to slump down onto the steps and let the emotions overcome you at the heart wrenching scene before you, going over all that you had witnessed so far. Their lifeless eyes were all you could think about, how they were drenched in their own blood, and the brutality of it all. You held your face in your hands as your whole body shuddered both from your sobs and from your

nerves. How could you have let this happen? You could have warned them. You could have warned everyone. The clown terrorizing you was one thing, but you didn't think he had the power to do something as unspeakable as this. He was going to find you. There wasn't a doubt in your mind about that. But then this nightmare could finally be over.

You couldn't breathe. The little hope you had died. You choked on nothing, collapsing to your knees as your lungs refused to expand. You coughed, a deep, rattling sound that sent your whole body into horrible shivers. You groaned, closing your eyes against a wave of dizziness. Anxiety coiled in your stomach, heart thudding against your ribs, fast and painful. You felt like you were going to throw up again. In an effort to stop it, you curled your hands into fists at your side, but the tremors only seemed to travel through your flesh. Up your arms. Through your bones. Through your veins.

In the midst of your anguish, you managed to open your eyes and glance up. There was no ceiling, only a vast expanse of darkness and emptiness above you. Nothingness. A void. Laughter rang within the four walls surrounding you, sinister and croaky. You squinted to focus your sight as you peered up into the darkness, trying to find the source of the laughter.

"What the hell are you doing down here?"

A voice yelled from upstairs. Your head immediately turned to the sound.

It was Hanna. Her face was marred with worry. She rushed down the steps quickly until she reached your cowering body against the wall. Your tear-filled eyes met hers but you couldn't speak. She was alive. She was okay.

"Oh my god, what happened? Are you okay?" she asked, her voice full of panic. She grabbed both of your quivering hands, holding onto them tightly. "What happened?" she repeated.

You didn't know if you could answer. She gave you a moment and you swallowed hard, willing your voice to speak.

"He's killing everyone. The bodies. They're everywhere. He's going to get me next," you managed to whisper.

"Who's here? Who's killing everyone?" your friend asked, her gaze unwavering and her voice soft and concerned.

"He's here, I know he is. I couldn't find you guys and I-"

"Who's trying to get you?" she asked as she watched your unfocused eyes dart around, searching for something in the room, before you looked back at her.

Your body was heaving, you sobbed and whined before you answered, your voice echoing through it was but a whisper.

"The clown. The clown that's coming for me. The one in the woods. Please, you have to help me, he's here. Please don't let him get me. He killed Amy and Jessica and-"

"What are you talking about? They're fine! Everyone's fine! We're all partying upstairs! No one is dead," Hanna said as she held onto your hands tighter. "Come on, let me bring you upstairs and you'll see for yourself."

"He killed them. They're right there-" you started, and pointed at where the dead brothers were laying. But now they were gone. Their dead bodies weren't there anymore. There was no blood. Not a trace of it. It was like it was never there in the first place. You looked back up at the ceiling. The darkness disappeared. Everything looked the way it was supposed to. Back to normal.

"There's no one there," Hanna replied sadly. She had a hopeless look on her face, like she didn't have the slightest idea on how to help you. It was so much worse than the look she gave you when you two came back to the party.

"They were dead. It was there, Hanna, you – you have to believe me. I saw it. I swear – I saw it, I did. Please believe me," you begged brokenly. In the back of your mind you wondered why she would believe you when you could hardly believe yourself.

Hanna simply listened, nodding her head in response. "You're safe.

We're safe. I promise," she assured you. "Come on, let's get you out of here," she told you softly.

She helped you stand back up on your feet and walked up the steps with you, her arm wrapped securely around your shoulder.

You turned to look back, to make sure the bodies were gone. There was nothing alarming in sight. Everyone was okay. No one died. But you could still hear the clown's chilling and vile laughter echoing in your ears. You could still feel his presence.

3. Never-Ending Nightmare

"You have to go home now. I don't know what mushrooms you're on, but clearly it's some hardcore shit, so I'm not taking no for an answer," your friend scolded after she proved to you that every person you thought was dead was actually alive and well.

"Yeah, you're right," you managed with a half smile. "I – I can take myself back home. You should be having fun."

"No way in hell! With all the shit you're seeing you'll be lucky if you get a DUI," she told you with a shake of her head. "I'll ask Tyler to take you back, you just stay right here, don't go anywhere," she said in a motherly tone before she ran off.

You nodded your head and waited. The room started to feel like it was spinning and the flashing lights and people blurred together. You were becoming light-headed and feeling overly exhausted from lack of sleep. You clasped your hands over your face; you just wanted to get out of here. You could feel people looking at you funny and hear their nasty laughter. Suddenly it seemed like you were in the spotlight just for people to mock, and it made you want to leave even more. You still couldn't believe what had happened, and how it wasn't even real. You couldn't get those grotesque images out of your head. Every time you closed your eyes you saw their cold, lifeless bodies.

It had felt like a century by the time Tyler had came to your aid and you could just imagine everything your bestie was saying about you to him, you foretold an intervention coming your way very soon.

He led you back out the door and into his car, an awkward silence hanging in the air between you two. There was a look of worry etched on his face as he drove you back to your place, similar to Hanna's, but it was even more vexing because you knew that he heard only her side of the story and he didn't know how to ask about yours. Maybe silence wasn't so bad though, you were not in the mood to explain something that you knew no one could truly understand.

You rested your head against the window and shut your eyes, only to

open them again when you saw the victims of the party. You were shaking, and the blood that clung to your dress was a cruel reminder of everything that took place before. There was still that queasy feeling swirling around in your stomach, and it hadn't left since you met the one from your nightmares. The more you tried to focus on anything other than the clown, it only made you think of him more. This whole night just felt like a nightmare, a horrible prank come to life.

"We should talk about what happened," Tyler started. The car was pulled over into your driveway and you only just realized when you heard the sound of his voice. "About what you saw back there."

"There's nothing to talk about," you retorted, avoiding eye contact with him and staring at the window.

"I'm really worried about you. Hanna said you were having a fucking panic attack in her garage. I can tell you haven't been sleeping and you don't seem like yourself. There's something clearly wrong-"

"I'm fine! I'm just a little tired, that's all, really. We don't have to do this," you gestured at the space around him, a frown stuck on your face. "I'm just not in a party mood. I still have to study anyway."

"I feel like there's something you're not telling us. You really freaked out Hanna, she's convinced you're on some type of drug that's making you see crazy shit," he told you, and his tone was not reassuring in the slightest. "I don't know what you took today, but you need to get off it-"

"Just forget about it, okay?" you interrupted. "Even if I explained everything, you wouldn't understand," you muttered to yourself.

"You have blood on your dress, don't you?" he blurted out suddenly.

You turned to him with widened eyes and felt a sharp pang in your chest at that. You wanted to answer honestly but then you remembered that they already thought you were crazy.

"No I don't. There's no blood whatsoever, it's as good as new," you answered after a beat.

"Are you sure?" he questioned, his tone disbelieving.

"Yes. Now can you leave me alone about this?" you snapped.

"Okay fine, I thought I could trick you into telling me something," he replied, seemingly ready to back down. You went to open the door to his car and before you could slam it shut, he added, "Do you want me to stay with you? If you need company, I'm totally cool with ditching the party."

You leaned down to the window to tell him bluntly, "No, just go. I don't need a babysitter. Have fun at the party."

And with that, he left. You half hoped that he would stay anyway, despite what you said, you didn't truly want to be alone. You would have liked the company, but you couldn't ask for help or let anyone know how scared you were. It would only put more emphasis on the situation, and you believed as long as you stayed in denial it would make everything feel less real. But even if you don't believe in something, it doesn't make that thing any less real, does it?

You walked up to the porch and knocked on the door. It was your little sister, Lily, dressed as a fairy princess. She was wearing a sparkling dress and holding a wand with a star on top of it.

"Hiya big sis!" she greeted with a wide smile on her face. "Sis, you won't believe how much candy I got today!" she said, practically bouncing with joy.

You muttered a 'hey' before entering the house in a rush and she shut the door. She stopped you in your tracks when she suddenly asked, "What happened to your dress? There's blood on it!"

What? How could she see that? Nobody else could.

Your back was facing her and you suddenly turned to her.

"What? Y-You can see that?" you questioned.

"Did a monster get you?" she asked with a frown, pointing at your dress.

"No, no I'm fine. Don't worry about it," you answered quickly with a nervous gulp.

"Good! I don't know what I would do if any monsters got you," she said with a carefree laugh.

"The monsters aren't going to get me, Lily, because I'm the one that has to protect you from them," you told her with a weak smile.

"I know, I'm so glad I got you big sis!" she replied cheerfully. She ran over to hug you but then she moved back when she looked at your dress again. "It reeks," she said with her nose scrunched in disgust.

"Alright, I know, I'm gonna go change now," you told her with a frown and turned around to make your way to the bathroom so you could take a shower.

"Mom is working late again and she told me to tell you that you gotta cook dinner tonight," she reminded you from a distance.

"You can have candy for dinner tonight," you said as you were walking off.

"Yay!" your sister exclaimed, her eyes beaming with joy.

A string of dread ran up your spine. There was no way she knew about the clown. But how did she see the blood? No, there was no way. It just didn't make sense. You didn't know what to believe anymore.

Once you reached the bathroom, you tore your dress off and practically ran to the shower. You took a brief one, just to rid yourself of the stench of blood and let the steamy warm water calm your bones. Once you were finished, you got dressed in a pair of comfortable pajamas.

It was time to call it a day and spend the rest of the day watching cheesy Halloween movies until you fell asleep, like you did every year so why should this one be any different?

You snuggled up on your bed and flicked through the channels until you found something you decided was worth watching. Though, you

were not distracted nor did you laugh at any of the corny jokes the movie provided. You couldn't stop thinking about the clown in the woods. The massacre at the party. Your little sister seeing the blood but everyone else being blind to it. But your eyes were so heavy and your head ached, you could barely think anymore. Your body needed sleep.

Then you heard it.

There was a thunderous bang at the door. Then another. And another.

The disturbance made you jump out of bed and rush to the front door. Your heart was quick to pick up in an unforgiving speed, it echoed in your ears, and your body trembled violently despite yourself. An icy feeling of dread washed over you and presented itself in every footstep.

You cautiously looked through the peephole, only to find three little boys all dressed up in gaudy costumes at the door with their candy buckets. You shook your head in annoyance before heaving a sigh of relief. You got all worked up for nothing. You opened the door quickly and the children greeted in unison, "Trick or treat!"

They were all dressed as superheroes; Batman, Superman, and Thor. There was flowy capes attached to their shiny costumes and they were giggling mischievously, babbling on about how much candy they got this Halloween. You grabbed a handful of sweets from the large bowl at the nightstand next to your door and divided it amongst them with a small smile. You were angry that they made such a commotion, but once you saw how delighted they were you couldn't bring yourself to yell at them.

"Happy Halloween," you said, with as much enthusiasm as you could muster. They all thanked you and left at a moment's notice, laughing as they ran off with their candy.

"Good riddance," you whispered to yourself before slamming the door shut.

You made your way back to the room and plopped on your bed,

seeking solace from the warmth of your blanket. Now you could enjoy the rest of this Halloween marathon, or at least try to. You could hardly pay attention to the film before you because you could already feel your eyes drifting shut. It had been a mentally draining day to say the least, and you practically didn't get any shuteye earlier. You remained awake for as long as you could, staying up late hours of the night fighting sleep until it unavoidably took you.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before the inevitable happened.

It was the small hours of the morning, but you couldn't tell the exact time. All you knew was it was dark, with the only light being a sickly green glow from the numbers on the clock.

The first thing you were aware of was your inability to move.

You were lying on your back looking up at the familiar ceiling in the room. The very air around you was unfamiliar, wrong – and as the seconds pass, that wrongness grows instead of fading. Your breath seemingly comes and goes and your eyes were snapped open, nearly frozen. You blinked slowly, trying to will yourself back to sleep.

Your body was heavy as though there were a ton of bricks stacked upon your chest, crushing you and forcing the air from your lungs. What was even more concerning was when you tried to speak you found you couldn't, it was as if you'd lost all control of your vocal cords. Though, this didn't stop you from trying. You focused all of your attention on uttering a scream, to get someone–anyone to help.

You tried and tried, but no one could hear you. No one could help you. Nothing would move, no matter how hard you willed. Your entire body felt like a dead weight, and it was locked in place as if someone had tied you down, but there were no restrains, nothing pinning you down. Your instincts were livid, shrill in screaming at you to get up and run or at least burrow further into the sheets. You stayed motionless, heart pounding too hard.

You couldn't move.

You couldn't breathe.

You couldn't speak.

A chill passed through you. You felt panic set in, as your eyes darted from the ceiling to around your bedroom, and you were certain that there was somebody else in the room. You could feel their presence lurking in the shrouded darkness. Who else was in your room? This couldn't be happening...

Something – Something with a name you dreaded to remember – hovers waiting on the edges of your mind, hovers intangibly just out of sight in the gloom, one shadow among many, looming over your body with the inevitability of sin. The darkness here could swallow you and leave nothing left behind, those two glowing pinpoints of yellow the last you'll ever see.

Your eyes widened in horror as you heard a raspy, croaky voice calling for you.

"Child," the voice called, "you cannot hide from me forever."

You wanted nothing more than to cover your ears to block out the voice, but you couldn't. "Go away," you repeated over and over in your head. This wasn't your usual nightmare, this felt like something far more sinister. Your mind became overwhelmed with feelings of horror and dread.

"Didn't I tell you? There's nothing you can do to get rid of me."

You were at a loss for words. No way was this happening. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be happening.

"Scared?" the voice asked cruelly.

Your eyes shifted from the shadows clawing their way out of the walls to across the room. It was the clown. He was sitting on a chair that wasn't far away from the foot of your bed, a vile toothy grin spreading across his face. He was unearthly, pale, and tall. He glowed in the faint light of the clock. Everything was so fuzzy, out of focus, but you still knew it was him. You had broken into a cold sweat and fear settled in the pit of your stomach, gripping at your throat.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" his voice was high and mocking,

and somewhere beneath the fear you felt a rush of anger.

The clown smirked, standing up from the chair and sitting down at the foot of the bed, now. You could feel the bed shift underneath his weight. He said nothing, and his smirk faded.

"Didn't your parents ever teach you to respond when spoken to?" he scoffed. "Honestly, humans today are so rude," he told you, a deep rumble of a laugh slipping through his lips. "Say, why don't you tell me how the party went?" he taunted. "It looked like you had a lot of fun."

You couldn't answer. He knew that.

Then you saw him above you, a fuzzed shadow in the shape of the clown. Then he suddenly became more in focus. It was him. You could feel a pair of clawed hands wrapped around your neck, pressing down and squeezing, your breath being strangled out of you. Pressure on your chest increased. It was getting harder to breathe. He was staring you down, grinning at your misery.

"You thought you could escape me, couldn't you?" he chuckled darkly. "You can't. I'll always be here. You can't get rid of me. I'm your worst nightmare come to life. A never-ending nightmare you can't wake up from."

You could feel tears forming in your eyes. *Let me go.* You screamed in your head. Pennywise mocked you, repeating out loud the thoughts in your head. He could hear everything. He was in your head. There was no escaping him. You still cried aloud in your head, hoping and praying there was some way out of this. That someone would come and wake you from this living nightmare.

"You can't hide from me. You can never hide from me! I can smell your fear, it's beautiful– beautiful fear. I want every ounce of it. Every drop, until it's all gone. I'll devour you whole until there isn't anything left of you. You're mine, all mine, and there's nothing you can do about it."

You screamed again, and this time you managed – or thought you managed – the slightest, tiniest rasp of breath. The last of your

oxygen was slipping away. You pitched forward with your entire body, willing yourself to move with every ounce of your strength. Every muscle had gone tense and tight, painfully so, and maybe you were even quivering but it wasn't enough.

He continued to mock you endlessly of every cry for help in your head that ended up lost on your tongue. You couldn't do anything. Every attempt was fruitless.

"But it's not your time yet – No, it's not, I'm going to save you for later. Yes, you'll taste just perfect when I do. So perfect. So sweet. Until then – It's not over until I say it is," he rasped, his vile laughter ringing in your ears.

Then it was over, you felt the weight and the pressure that had been binding you be lifted all at once. You were free; alive. It was over, whatever the hell you just experienced was over.

You woke up in a panic.

It wasn't what like most people imagined though, with flailing and shouting and a body covered in sweat. No, what you displayed was utter silence, stillness so prominent that not even your lungs remembered how to work, your eyes wide and frozen in terror. The clown was gone. You blinked your eyes once, then twice, then again, just to be sure you were awake.

You slowly sat up when you felt your breath come back to you and allowed the blanket to slide off your chest. You scanned the room. You noted it was morning once you saw the gleam of the sun coming through your window. You could see your room clearly almost as soon as your eyes opened, everything seemed to be in order. You heaved a sigh, thankful to finally be able to move again and that the clown was out of sight.

You turned towards the glowing digital alarm clock residing on your bedside table. It read 8am. You were still so tired, it felt like you hadn't slept a wink. You took a deep breath, attempting to calm the panic your body was still holding onto. You got out of bed to check yourself over in the mirror.

There was dark red clawed imprinted marks covering your neck, dotted with dry blood, and the very sight of it made a scream bubble in your throat. It almost sounded like a boiling kettle, and you kept your mouth shut, breathing through it. It stung and ached so bad, your whole body was flinching violently with the agony of it. You couldn't help but start crying again, eyes filling with tears as you stared back at the reflection before you.

The words from your nightmare lingered in your head, replaying over and over again.

You can't hide from me.

You walked out of your room and entered the kitchen, pouring yourself a glass of water. You chugged it down quickly, and from the window you spotted your little sister watering the plants in the front yard like she did every morning before she went to school. She waved at you and you waved back absently. You set your glass down in the sink and the moment you turned away from the window and left the kitchen, Lily was gone.

4. Missing Doesn't Mean Dead

You walked wearily beside Hanna as you both made your way through yet another dense forest. It had been nearly two weeks since Lily went missing. Missing, only missing. She wasn't dead. You refused to even let that dirty word touch your tongue even once. You couldn't even think it. Death is horrible. It can't happen to Lily, not Lily. Lily's not dead. But there was nothing that could distract you from the truth.

Gone. Lily was gone.

Now she was part of the long list of unfortunate people who mysteriously went missing in Derry.

Every moment that passed felt like a waking nightmare.

The reality was almost too much to bear and you twisted away from the thoughts but like any of your personal demons, they curled back toward you, taunting you. You couldn't assume the worst. You couldn't. You wouldn't dare. The clown had nothing to do with this. He could torment you all day, just as long as he didn't...

No, you couldn't even think it.

In the time that passed you and Hanna had hardly spoken; as if leaving your grief unnamed could make it disappear. Or make Lily reappear. So far, it hadn't been working.

What little sunlight that filtered through the trees began to dim and you knew that it wouldn't be long before you would have to head back to an empty home.

When you discovered she was missing, you were in a state of shock; you couldn't even fully grasp what had happened. The loss wasn't something you could touch or see — Lily just wasn't there anymore — so how were you supposed to come to terms with it? How were you supposed to mourn something that had slipped through your fingers and when there was no proof? How were you supposed to accept it when you still found yourself looking for her, as soon as you

turned your head?

It was agony waking up, as you found, lying in your bed as the chirping of birds sounded through the morning air. You were a complete mess, refusing to move if you could help it, staring vacantly at the opposite wall or ceiling, barely eating or sleeping. It just didn't seem to matter. It felt as if a relentless, merciless weight was pushing you against the mattress, and it didn't matter that you knew that the pressure wasn't physical — you still couldn't move. Your limbs were locked in place, while your head felt heavy and sluggish enough to leave you disoriented and increasingly alarmed. Your heart clenched as your mind trailed off to the thought of your sister, and the light in her eyes.

She's only nine. Nine. She's just a little girl.

You couldn't move unless you were searching for her. You could hardly speak about her, because then that would only make the situation feel even more real. You just couldn't.

You felt disconnected — adrift, somehow — as if you weren't fully attached to your skin anymore, and just existed where you had no influence over your own body or what happened to it. You weren't even sure if you cared. The only thing that mattered now was finding Lily and bringing her back home.

Whatever strength you managed to gather was spent on curling up and burying your face in your pillow. After a couple of agonizingly long minutes the tension in your body and growing thickness in your throat became too much. One hitched, trembling breath was all it took for you to start crying.

At first you had no idea why. Your thoughts were too muddled and hazy for anything to make sense. All you knew was that your chest was constricting to the point of pain and in your desperation you clung to the sheets like a lifeline, pathetically hoping it would make you less likely to break.

It didn't.

The loss paralyzed you in a way that would have terrified you, had

you been present enough to actually realize what was going on. But while in the middle of it, you just couldn't see that far. You barely even managed to contemplate what would happen the coming hour, let alone your own deteriorating mental state.

Everything was heavy, your body, your mind, your emotions. Losing her was so raw it felt hollow; feelings rolling over you in waves. Lost could be an apt way to describe it. Emptiness echoed from your heart.

You were exhausted; physically and emotionally drained, it had been another full day of searching for your little sister.

You hung up countless missing flyers with her face on it all over town and no one had seen where she had went.

You searched every nook and cranny in Derry with no luck. Day after day, it was the same thing. You and your friends would search for her in a place you hadn't looked yet (many days you went venture out by yourself even after dark), without any idea where she would be. You thought about how scared she must be, about how much you wished that there was some way you could know she was still out there. There was no way you were giving up on her. You were supposed to protect her from the monsters.

After another long, tiring day, you and Hanna went your separate ways. Tomorrow would be the same. You would miss school and go looking for her once again. It didn't matter how long it took, you were willing to risk it all to find her.

With a frustrated sigh, you closed the door behind you, coming back to an empty, lonely home. All you had was despair, and it followed you around like a shadow. You were walking down the hallway to where your room was, but then you found yourself backtracking and moving in the direction of your sister's room.

For the first time since her disappearance, you entered her room. You sucked in a sharp, shaky breath.

You were immediately greeted with bright hues of pink and yellow coming from the walls and the rest of the room. The bed is empty,

save for the numerous dolls and stuffed animals. So is the chair. You looked over the room, stunned, speechless. The bed is still a mess, unmade, the duvet pulled to one side.

You stepped in slowly despite yourself. You shouldn't be in here. It would only make you feel worse, if that was even possible at this point. You sat down on her bed, the mattress dipping once you did. The room was incredibly quiet, horrifically so. You stared up at the ceiling with sightless eyes for a lot longer than you should have, too numb to cry, but wishing that you could.

Your eyes then wandered around for a few moments until you spotted Lily's sketchbook lying on the floor under the chair, open to the last page she had been working on—a drawing of you and her. You were both smiling and you were holding her hand. It's half-finished. You could tell she was coloring it with crayons.

A chill enveloped your body and you flipped to the next page, finding a picture of a puppy. She always wanted one. You turned it again, only to find a drawing of the clown, Pennywise, holding a red balloon. His face was unsmiling. Involuntarily, you dropped the sketchbook in your shock, shrieking.

No, it couldn't be. A series of shudders went through your body. You couldn't believe it. No, no, no, no.

You reached down to pick the sketchbook back up and when you looked at it, Pennywise's expression changed. He was grinning wide now, looking devilishly proud. Your whole body felt like it was paralyzed. Everything was hitting you all at once. Lily was seeing him too. And how did the sketch's features changed just like that?

You swallowed thickly, body violently shaking. You went to the next page.

You found a picture of a rotting corpse who resembled a zombie, an eye dangling out of its socket, devouring a brain in its hand.

You flipped again. It was a drawing of a man in a black suit with his eyes gouged out, streaks of crimson red running down his face, his mouth wide open like he was screaming. A twisted knot built up in

the pit of your stomach.

Then in the next page there was a gigantic black spider using his legs to tear the flesh of an older woman's body on the ground.

You kept going through the pages only to find more disturbing drawings but eventually it stopped until there was only pictures of the clown left. There was so many of him grinning wickedly, so much so that the pictures seemed to be in motion, and they started to look like he was laughing maniacally. You were flipping through the sketchbook rapidly just to find anything other than the clown, but it didn't stop. He was mocking you with his laughter. In a panic, you kept going and the pictures only continued to depict him taunting you in the same way.

In your frustration, you tossed the sketchbook across the room and it hit the wall before it fell onto the ground with a thud.

"Goddammit!" you cried out.

Head in hands, you rocked back and forth in your anger and despair. Your next breath came in on a trembling gasp and your muscles wind tight to the bone. Your body tried to curl in, but you forced yourself still and focused on your breath. The breath, not the shuddering. The terror will pass, just like it has every other time. Breathe. Just breathe. You told yourself over and over again, like a mantra. Exhale to make room, slow inhale, slow, feel the breath, push the air out with your stomach. Again.

Then you heard it, a childish giggle, haunting and terrifying.

"Kill Lily!" a cheerful yet robotic voice spoke from behind you.

Your head slowly turned to the sound, fearful of where it came from. Your eyes darted around the room, examining your surroundings. You found a doll with short black hair and a red smile painted on her lips facing you from the corner of the bed along with all the other toys. She wasn't looking at you before. But it couldn't have moved on its own. When you turned away from its sinister stare, you heard her voice again.

"Kill Lily!" the doll repeated.

You looked back at the doll again, she was completely still.

Then you heard another voice, one that was deeper, raspier. "Murder Lily!"

You turned your head to look where it came from once again, and the second you did you heard another voice, one that was eerily soft yet forbidding. The toy said, "Bury Lily!"

Then coming all at once, they chanted together again and again, "Kill Lily! Murder Lily! Bury Lily!"

To shut out the noise, you covered your ears and closed your eyes, refusing to hear or look at them.

It wouldn't stop. The toys only became louder in their unforgiving taunts. Their eyes were glowing and their mouths unmoving as they shouted at you. You were sure every single one was coming at you now with the same threats.

Your shoulders trembled with silent sobs, and you could feel the heat on your cheeks as your tears ran down your face. You kept your eyes closed, taking deep breaths, and there was a strangled scream on your lips as you feverishly shook your head.

Too much. It was all too much. You could hear their hissing in your ears, and the endless mockery was playing on a loop, echoing. Your heart started to beat fast and so hard that it hurt. You were hunched over on the end of the bed. You gritted your teeth, swallowing around the lump that threatened to rise in your throat.

More tears spilled down your cheeks as you took rapid, ragged breaths. You couldn't take it anymore.

You snatched one of the stuffed animals, trying to search for an off button but when you found that there wasn't one, you tore open the fabric of their stomach feverishly with your hands. The material flying about the room. The voices didn't stop, and you weren't sure if it was your imagination or not but the other toys seemed to have gotten louder. You grabbed a doll and smashed its head against the

bed board. Even without the doll's head attached to its body, she was still repeating herself. You tossed the head against the wall and it shattered to pieces.

With shaky hands, you broke whatever menacing toy you could get a hold of. In their sing-song voices they continued and only became louder, their chorus of derision was deafening. It was another nightmare come to life. Another taste of hell.

You kept your mouth closed a moment longer, before it tore out of you. "Please stop! Please!" you begged in a scream. You had to fight not to empty the contents right then and there, pressing a hand to your mouth to hold back the small keening sound that would otherwise escape. Your shoulders were shaking and they would occasionally hitch with a hiccup or gasp for air as your body broke out in gooseflesh.

"Sweetheart?"

You turned around to find the source of that gentle, familiar voice. It was your mother. She was leaning against the doorway with a concerned look marring her features.

You froze and dropped the doll you were about to break next. The sound echoing across the walls.

"Mom," you started but you couldn't string together a coherent sentence, and you could only stare back, mouth agape. You felt your face crumple. You knew this looked bad. Really bad. You were tearing apart your missing sister's room and screaming.

"Oh baby," your mom said sadly. She rushed over to you and opened her arms to bring you into a warm embrace.

You couldn't get a word out at first, not with how tight your throat was. Mom took note of this and hushed you.

"I miss her so much, mom," you sobbed brokenly.

"I know it hurts, love, I miss her too," she whispered lovingly and tightened her arms around you. "I'm here. I've got you."

You buried your face into her shoulder as you wept. A hiccup caught your throat, then another, and more tears fell. "I don't know what to do. I don't know where else to look," you wailed helplessly, your voice muffled.

"Shhh, I know, I know," she replied in a soft whisper as she pressed you closer to her chest. "We'll find her. She's out there. It's going to be okay."

"How can you be so sure?" you questioned.

"It will be, trust me, I promise you," she told you. She pulled back and wiped the tears away from your eyes with her hand. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No," you mumbled.

"I'm gonna make you something to eat, love, I'll be right back," she promised and leaned in to kiss your forehead before she left the room.

You simply nodded your head in response and sank back on your little sister's bed, feeling too exhausted and drained to continue standing. It all came crushing down and you curled up on the sheets, weeping. In an empty, cold room. Your crying was oddly silent. No noisy gasping, dramatic sobs, just a quiet shaking rattle of pain. A large lump had formed in your throat as you tried to keep your breath strong and even. Tears leaked down the sides of your face, leaving streaks in their wake.

"It should have been me," you muttered to yourself. "It should have been me. I'm so so sorry, Lily."

You buried your face in your hands as you continued to weep silently. It wasn't fair. She had her whole life ahead of her.

"It's all my fault."

It wasn't said verbally. But it radiated like poison in your head. You don't know how you could have stopped any of it, what you could have done to prevent it, but you blamed yourself for what happened to her. A wave of nausea hits you so hard that you can't tell whether

it's the sickness or the grief that makes you double over, incoherent mumbles of Lily's name crossing your lips.

Then in the midst of your pity party, you heard your phone ring. You grabbed it from your pocket and quickly answered. It was Tyler.

"Hello?" you said around a snuffle.

"I saw him. I know exactly what you're talking about now," Tyler replied.

"You saw who?" you questioned, and you sat up on the bed.

"The clown. He came to me."

Your heart sank.

5. You'll Never Be Alone

"So you saw him, too? The clown?" you asked, getting straight the point the moment he entered your room.

"Yeah, I did," Tyler gulped nervously. "I was doing my homework, trying to catch up but then I got so tired and I dozed off, that's when the nightmare started."

"What did he look like?"

"He was big. Freakishly tall. He had these claws. Orange hair. Red lips. White skin. This really creepy, fucked up smile. He was wearing something white, kind of like a dress. I'm getting the chills just thinking about it," Tyler recalled. "He said his name is Pennywise."

"Oh god, no," you said, turning away from his intense gaze for a moment to process this situation. "That's him. This is not good. This is really really bad. Fuck! Why the fuck is this happening?!" you cried, speaking more to yourself than to him.

"I don't know. I'm really freaked out. I've been looking over my shoulder ever since, it's like I always feel like someone is watching me," Tyler said. His usual combed dark hair was now very unkempt so you knew this must be really weighing on him. There was strands of his curls that were sticking out everywhere, it was like he had just rolled out of bed.

"This is so fucked up," you said, pressing your hands against your temples. "I thought he was just terrorizing me, but now he's gotten to you, and – and I think he took Lily."

"What does he want from us? Why is he doing this?" Tyler asked, just as confused as you were. You wish you had an answer for that.

"I don't know! Somehow it feels like he's everywhere but at the same time he's nowhere and he just shows up whenever, wherever! It's driving me crazy because I don't have a fucking clue what he wants or how I can make him go away," you said, your heartbeat going off like a skyrocket against your ribs. "He fucking scares me, so much."

"What are we gonna do?" Tyler questioned.

You let out a deep sigh. "He might have Lily, so I don't want to make him angry. God, this is really fucking bad. If he does anything to her or you, I swear to-"

Tyler cuts you off and clasped both of his hands over your shoulders. "Hey, hey. We are going to be okay. We are going to figure this out. There's no way in hell we are letting him win."

"I don't think you understand. He's playing this sick, twisted game with me and he's not going to stop! You don't know the shit I've seen and felt when he's around! You don't get it!" you told him. "I can't sleep. I can't. I can't do anything."

"You're right, I don't know everything but I know some, we're in the same boat now. You have me. You'll never be alone, I'm not going anywhere, not even for a second. Promise," Tyler told you, gazing back into your eyes earnestly.

You nodded your head weakly. "Thank you. I'm gonna need you."

"I'm gonna need you too," Tyler said honestly.

"Yeah, I don't know if I can do this without you. I really don't want to be alone right now, or ever," you admitted under a shaky breath. "So you don't think I'm crazy anymore?"

"No, definitely not. I mean, I never thought you were crazy, I was just worried about you, but now I know it's real. He's real," Tyler whispers.

"Yeah, that's what I've been trying to tell you guys," you said, shaking your head.

"Now I know. I'm not going to let him hurt you, okay? He's gonna have to go through me because I'm not letting anything happen to you," Tyler reassured.

"Okay," you whispered, gazing back at him longingly. "I can't do this without you."

You found yourself getting lost in his sparkling blue eyes and counting the numerous freckles on his face. Suddenly silence filled the air around you two, but it was a comfortable kind of silence. Nothing more needed to be said and for the first time in a while you started to feel like maybe everything was gonna be okay and work itself out, somehow, someway.

For a brief moment you started to wonder why you broke up with him in the first place. Granted he wasn't the best at communicating and opening up about his feelings, so there was that, and after a while you thought it was best that you two just stayed friends. Tyler was never about the deep stuff and didn't always have his priorities in order, but things seemed to be different now. You were both connecting on an emotional level, and you felt like you could tell him anything now, it was like an old flame was reignited. Those feelings came rushing back tenfold before you could even wrap your brain around what was happening.

Without giving it another thought, you leaned forward and impulsively went in for a kiss.

Tyler couldn't help but smirk when you made your bold move, felt the press of your lips against his own, and he was definitely not opposed to it. Eagerly, Tyler met your kiss.

You pulled back and grabbed him by his shirt before planting another kiss on his lips again, deeper this time. You fell back on the bed and let him settle atop of you, his warm hands running down your body. You reached for his pants and undid them, slipping them down in a hurry and reaching your hand in, and you uttered a gasp in excitement when you reached for his member. You tugged at his boxers and then kicked them off the bed along with his pants. Tyler was well endowed, he was definitely of considerable size. You wrapped your fingers around his length and he was delighted by the firm touch. You pumped him again and again, nice and slow, but Tyler couldn't wait another second.

Tyler practically ripped the buttons off from your grey blouse in his excitement and lifted it above your head, then he reached for your pants and slid them down below your knees, tossing them across the room. He undid your bra and then hooked his thumbs into your

panties before he shoved them down, you wiggled your hips to make the whole process a lot quicker. He grabbed hold of you, and rolled you over quickly, pulling you onto your hands and knees as he guided you up the bed.

Once he had himself prepared, he pushed his throbbing thick cock head into you, drawn toward the slickness of your heat. He pressed himself against it and drew a deep breath. He sank into you carefully, not moving too impatiently or trying to get too carried away even though he wanted nothing more. He wanted to try to keep himself under control and build to that.

He started to thrust, his member guided steadily deeper into you as each rock of his hips back and forth pushed into you a bit further, exploratory and careful about how he took you so that he could savor the feeling of his girthy length opening up your inner walls, loosening you up a little more with each push deeper into you. Your wet heat clung around him, and it was just like how you remembered but even better now, it had been so long since the last time you two had sex, too long.

His hands tightened on your hips and he let out a groan when he slammed forward, burying his cock to the hilt inside of you and letting you feel his size, leaving you to gasp in delight at the way he shoved himself into you. He drew back quickly and then gave you another slam, all in the name of winding up for a sudden and brutal pounding. He fucked you relentlessly, moving with a steadily building speed as he pushed into you, his hips working needily back and forth while he clutched you tightly, holding on for dear life as he sought to give you the best you ever had.

"Fuck, I've missed you," you said breathlessly.

"And I've missed you," Tyler replied in a breathy whisper.

Your head rolled back as you felt the hard slams into you, his hips crashing down against your ass. Tyler thrust faster into your slick heat as he savored the sound of your moans and the feeling of your tight inner walls. You pushed your ass back against the thrusts that hammered down into you, loving the feeling of being completely and utterly full. Flesh slapping nosily against flesh filled the air as he

made sure his each and every thrust into your heat sheathed his cock all the way into you, going ball deeps again and again.

He couldn't get over how good it all felt, how high he rode atop the thrills of being with you again. With hard grunts and frantic slams that left your ass shaking, you lit up with a swell of need and pleasure that knew no end. You weren't content to just lie there and take it, you were actively making the sex faster and harder as you impatiently chased raw indulgence in its most satisfying and shameless form.

Nothing was going to stop you now, nothing was going to slow you down, and feeling Tyler refuse to do the same and take it easy left you with all the heated friction and intense glee that you needed, there was so much pleasure hitting you from all sides that you were overwhelmed by it all. There was such vigor and intensity in every motion and rock of his hips. You needed this more than anything, and to know that Tyler had risen to the occasion so much made it all the better; everything you were subjected to was pure bliss, and the madness of getting fucked so hard and so right had you losing yourself, making you practically melt in his hold. Everything you wanted in a man, you were finding, and that had you wanting him more than ever. You couldn't get enough of the burning, fervent speed of sheer dominance he was exerting over you, it was absolutely intoxicating and addicting. While you were getting taken there was nothing you felt but pure electrifying, surrender course through your veins.

"Tyler, you're so good, fuck, please don't ever stop, please keep going," you begged.

"Believe me, I don't intend to," Tyler chuckled around a heavy breath.

Tyler reached over to grab hold of your hair and tugged back on it, making you cry in surprise more than in sharp and searing pain, but it didn't matter; it was everything you needed, and you let out the most delighted noises as you got exactly what you craved.

Tyler was a passionate lover and he was always very considerate whenever you two made love, so he wasn't one for thrill-seeking sex, but this was on a whole different level and so not like him. There was

something different about him, but whatever it was, you loved it and you wanted more of this Tyler. He also felt a lot bigger now, you didn't know what that was about, but once again you had no complaints.

"Oh fuck, you can do whatever you want to me, anything at all, I want you so bad," you whispered.

"I think I'll just take you up on that offer," Tyler whispered back with a wicked little smirk on his face.

He grabbed hold of your head and shoved you face-down into the mattress for good measure as he staked his brutal claim, holding back absolutely nothing.

"You're going to be a gaping, leaking mess by the time I'm done with you, and you're going to thank me for it," Tyler groaned.

Being shoved face-down into the bed couldn't fully silence the vigorous, pleading moans that rang out as you were being fucked like an animal. You were ploughed so viciously and you were without apology or shame for the pleasure you felt and the ways it tore through you, happily giving yourself up to Tyler and embracing everything that he had to offer you. All you could do was keep it going, try to chase this feeling for as long as possible until you couldn't anymore and you inevitably succumbed to his every desire. You were a mess, thoroughly used and fucked every which way to a degree so sweet and indulgent that you couldn't help yourself.

Your ragged breaths and winding moans mingled together and filled the room. You two were met in a heated frenzy that was fast, dirty, shameless, and driven by the desperation of two people who had been brought together by very strange, disturbing circumstances only to find yourselves joined in unison amid the gratification that seized you two from within, overwhelming you both and leaving you very happy to have found one another. There was an odd sense of excitement to it as you found yourselves in the position against all odds, the abnormal situation giving way to something wonderful now, but rather than dwell on any sort of softness, you two fucked hard and vigorously celebrated your meeting through vulgarity and depravity in a way that was perfect.

He picked up a barbaric, unforgiving pace that had you begging for more in no time. He was hitting all the right spots with each brutal shove of his hips, and it only served to help drive you closer and closer to the orgasmic peak you so urgently needed. Your eyes rolled back and with a series of full body shivers, you screamed, moaning in bliss as you lost yourself to the sudden waves of ecstasy searing through you, igniting your body in ways you could never forget. It was everything you had wanted it to be, your climax ravaging you and leaving you so sweetly vulnerable to the pleasure and delight that you sought.

Back and forth your hips bucked, fervidly fucking yourself on his cock through your peak as your desperate slick walls clamped down around Tyler and tried to needily milk him of his load. It was to your deep satisfaction that you felt Tyler lose himself, groaning and sheathing his cock inside of you as he gave you what you craved. His hot essence flooded into you, filling you up and leaving your already elated body to burn with the thrill of release. It felt so good, and you realized then just how amazing it was being with Tyler. You threw your head back as much as you could under the circumstances and underneath him you were a heated, screaming wreck who bucked and twisted in place on the bed.

"Oh my god, I think I'm gonna need a breather," you said, releasing a deep breath and allowing the sweat on your body to cool.

But then, in no time at all, right after those words came out of your mouth, Tyler slipped himself back inside of you, wanting—needing more.

"Ooh! Okay, guess not. I can go again," you told him with a puff of a laugh.

"I'm not finished with you just yet," Tyler whispered, a smirk playing on his lips.

Tyler gripped your hip and shoulder with his hands, keeping you helpless and stuck in place as he started to pound you down on your hands and knees with his thick cock. A quivering gasp escaped your lips as you were taken from behind once again with rough, steady motions that shook you down to your core. Your moans rose up

hotter and needier as he continued to ram into you, your loose, slick hole yielding utterly to his attention. You reached to grip the bed sheets, cooing in excitement as you were taken on harshly by the eager thrusts, making your body shiver with a twisting, throbbing excitement.

"Oh, you're so big," you murmured. "Please keep fucking me. Use me and don't stop. My body is all yours."

"That's right, it's all mine," Tyler growled, hands moving down from your shoulder to grope at your dangling breast while the other on your hip moved inward to fondle your supple rear. He rocked his hips back and forth as he fucked you with a relentless show of roughness and desperation.

"Yes! Yes! It's all yours!" You cried, your body relishing in the pressure of getting fucked this hard and this hot by his big cock, his every thrust and grope feeling absolutely blissful, and you could never get enough. He didn't let up for a moment in the way he thrust into you with the raw ferocity and vigor necessary to push you over the edge. You felt overwhelmed by the primal urges of something thumping through your body, some rush of searing need taking you and refusing to let go. You inched closer to the madness, accepting it all as something burning within you so powerfully that you could barely think straight, but you were ready to own up to that and give in to all of it, a needy wreck thrashing about as you twisted through the desire, through the want, through the absolute need and ecstasy.

Tyler continued hammering into your waiting, wet heat as he worked with greedy, intense motions and fervid purpose. His powerful, driven fervor moved with something bestial and chaotic, needing to push into your slick warmth again and again. He didn't hold anything back in having his way with you, making you ache and twist with the pressure and heat of being completely taken on. It felt like nothing else mattered. Only Tyler and the way he made your body plead for more, how he made you swell with the desire of being so harshly taken and used that you didn't know how to help yourself. It was becoming too much for you to handle, but in a good way, so much throbbing, primal excitement surging through you as you took the hard pounding, your fists in a white-knuckle grip as they trembled with your whole body. He loved the sensation of your inner walls

tightening down around his cock, refusing to let him go.

"Fuck, you feel so incredible, I don't ever want to stop fucking you, ravaging you, it's all I fucking want," Tyler grunted, pounding into you from behind harder and faster still as his hips found the rhythm and he worked tirelessly to fuck you into searing, untamed bliss. And to his credit, he succeeded; you moaned louder and hotter under the pressure, writhing in the shameless ecstasy of something more throbbing and wild than you knew what to do with, and he was happy to capitalize on the momentum, to keep thrusting through the rush of his burning desire, guiding you down deeper into the throes of his twisted affections and something you were never going to come up from and be the same after.

His hands roamed further up the curve of your back and he dug his fingers into your skin, hard enough to sting and leave marks. He was urging you closer and closer until there wasn't a sliver of space between you two. He wasn't treating you like you were fragile, and that's what you loved. You wanted to be roughed up every now and then, it was something new and different and exciting and definitely at a time like this, you couldn't have it any other way. You needed this, this all-consuming, vehement kind of passion.

All of the pounding and thrusting and violating pushed you to the breaking point as you came again, harder this time, gasping brokenly as your body surrendered to a powerful orgasm, pleading for him to fill you up with all the intensity and urgency of someone needing nothing more than sweet release. Tyler pushed into you and a rush of cum pumped into your waiting hole, filling you up and leaving your legs trembling and body shivering.

Tyler remained buried inside of you, savoring the moment before drawing very slowly back, a rumble of a groan vibrating through his body.

"Okay, I'm really gonna need that breather now," you said with a breathless laugh.

Tyler laughed too, his heated body still pressed against yours.

You and Tyler stayed like that for a long moment, catching your

breaths and letting the sweat on your bodies cool.

But then a knock came at your door.

Immediately, you pushed Tyler off of you and grabbed the nearby blue robe that was placed on your chair in front of your desk.

"Hide, get out of here," you whispered loudly to Tyler, waving your hands at him dramatically. He seemed to find the predicament amusing but after a few forceful nudges he did as you said. You didn't see where he went but you heard the dip of the bed and assumed that he hid somewhere.

Then came a louder knock.

You wrapped the robe around your body as quickly as possible. You tried to fix your hair by running your fingers through the strands and you wiped some of the sweat that was dripping from your neck. You didn't want it to be so obvious that you just had sex. You took a deep breath before you walked over and opened the door.

You opened the door just a crack, but then in a moment you opened it the rest of the way once you discovered who it was.

You were immediately stunned, frozen in place, eyes wide in horror when you saw who was behind the door.

It was Tyler.

Tyler.

But that wasn't possible. No, it couldn't be. No, that didn't make any sense. You couldn't believe it. Who—Who were you with just now?

"Hey, your Mom let me in," Tyler said, a concerned look on his face.

You turned around when you were finally able to move again, and you found that Tyler wasn't on the bed.

This couldn't be happening.

This couldn't be real.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Oh god, no.

Your blood ran cold. You couldn't breathe.

6. A Touch of Madness

"Can I come in?" Tyler asked, that same concerned expression stuck on his face.

Your mouth was uncomfortably wide open and you couldn't get a word out no matter how hard you tried. You could only shake your head in response as your whole body became overwhelmed with violent shudders.

Shock was the first thing to hit you, although it was quickly followed by intense, primal fear.

Why? How did you let this happen?

You blinked, heavy and slow, unattached to your body, it felt like you were underwater. It was an attempt to wake up from this nightmare, but you never did. No, this was real. You were living and breathing this moment. You gave yourself to a monster, the monster who has been hunting you. You were completely and utterly powerless. You have always been when it came to this monster's twisted, sick games.

You couldn't take it anymore. You didn't think your heart was equipped to handle this.

"No, no you can't come in, I'm sorry, you can't!" you yelled at Tyler before slamming the door in his face.

"Hey, please open up! I need to talk to you," Tyler begged, banging on the door.

"No, go away! Please just go!" you cried, pressing your body against the door.

"I don't think you should be alone right now, and neither do I. Please don't push me away," Tyler persisted.

"Did you not hear me? I said go away! Please Tyler, I don't need this from you right now!" you shouted back.

Tyler knocked on the door one more time and sighed in frustration. You could hear him lingering around the door but after a long moment you didn't feel his presence there anymore. You couldn't bear to look at him, right now. You wouldn't be able to physically stomach it.

You stared vacantly at the room before you, your breaths slow and shallow, each one was painful. It was suffocating in the worst possible way. Everything seemed to be spiraling around you, you could hardly see straight, your body heaving as you tried to catch your breath. You were trembling, your mind racing as you replayed what happened in your head again and again and again. You started gasping in air but it was getting stuck in your throat. Your eyes were brimming with tears, your face as pale as a ghost. You were coughing, shoulders shaking as you try to pull in more air, though it remained futile. You were cowering against the door, unable to hide from your own mind. There was a tingling in your fingers and when you looked down at your shaking hands, it was the only thing that you could focus on. It was like an out-of-body experience, and you were watching a tragedy unfold before you, only you were hoping that the main character wasn't you, but it was.

The noise in your head was incredibly loud. It was overstimulating to the point of madness. You wanted it to stop, you needed some semblance of sanity, some bastion of peace. But you were here in your room, breathing heavily, eyes burning. Your heart was pounding away as if you were getting stabbed in the chest repeatedly, it was tight and hot and restricting. You could feel—hear your heart beating rapidly, you felt like it was about to burst right out of your chest.

Tears streamed down your face, great heaving sobs wracked your body. Your hands curled and uncurled in your hair. Sweat beads formed on your forehead. Your stomach churned. You shuddered again, practically doubling over. You whispered to yourself, "Make it stop, make it stop, please, make it stop."

You didn't know how to deal with this crushing weight that was against your chest, crushing your ribs and piercing your heart. You stayed against your door, trying to focus on anything other than the monster, that malevolent clown.

Once your breathing had slowed down more and your shaking and unceasing panic had eased somewhat, the only sign of your distress was the tears falling down your cheeks like little waterfalls and the incessant pain in your chest. You took in air, deep and slow. In through your nose, out through your mouth. The itch in your throat died, but you could still feel it in your bones, under your skin, in your head.

You stepped away from the door, but not without stumbling and nearly falling to the ground.

"I-I know it was you! You can come out! Stop hiding, why don't you?!" you screamed, your hands formed into fists. You were challenging him—it—whatever this monster was.

There was no answer. Silence was the only response, it rung back to you and it was deafening.

"Please stop! I know you can hear me! Please just stop! I can't take it! Please!" you begged, the words coming straight from your throat.

"I've had enough! I can't do this anymore, I can't! Stop it!" you continued, but again, there was no answer. Your breathing was still hitched, but it started to slow to a much more manageable rate.

"Why? Why? Why?!" you screamed, grabbing fistfuls of your hair, eyes full of rage. "Why me?!"

You slumped to the ground next to the wall and started rocking back and forth. Your hands remained in your hair and you stared down at your knees as you kept them pressed against your body. You were going crazy, out of your mind. This was bad, really bad. You didn't know what to do with yourself. You didn't want to be alone, but at the same time you didn't want to be around other people, because you couldn't tell the difference between what was real and what wasn't anymore, that line was blurred, dangerously so.

What followed was the loudest silence you had ever experienced. The cacophony of your thoughts were turbulent and terrible, and you couldn't escape the crushing weight of what you just experienced. You bit back a sob and brought a hand up to wipe your eyes. You

didn't have time to fall apart. You knew that you couldn't stay here a moment longer. You had to get out of the house.

There was still work to do.

You decided that you should go search for Lily again. You felt wrong whenever you were not doing everything in your power to find her and you really needed to focus on anything but what just happened. No, you couldn't bring yourself to think about that right now. You had to look for Lily. You took off your robe in a hurry and slipped on a pair of grey pants and a matching hoodie.

It was past midnight and you started wandering in the woods with only a flashlight. The night air was cold and biting, the sky a deep shade of blue and the moon was full and bright, casting a pale glow on everything below. The wind plucked at your clothes and tugged at your hood. You pulled your hood low over your eyes, your footsteps a quiet whisper over the ground as you ventured further into the woods.

You were twitchy, your eyes flitting to every rustling leaf and snapping twig as if they were warning signs. In the darkness, you thought you could see shadows out of the corner of your eyes, shifting and fading away when you looked directly at them, and it was just about driving you crazy. Your nerves were already grated down to their last thread and you didn't need shadows that weren't there to finally make you snap.

You knew you shouldn't be out here at this time of night but sitting around doing nothing wasn't helping and you couldn't just pray that Lily would find her way back, you had to do something about it. It certainly wasn't proper or safe for a young woman such as yourself to be out alone at this hour. As a girl, you had been told many stories about things that lurked in the night. You knew of the monsters, the depraved strangers, but you couldn't pay mind to that when Lily was in danger and she needed your help.

The branches around you shook and creaked loudly. You shivered, taking another step and a leaf crunched underneath your boot. The wind whistled through the trees, crickets chirped. In the distance a dog barked and a man yelled at it. Your foot landed squarely in a

mud patch the light rainstorm earlier that day brought on. You muttered a few words your mother would have been abhorred you knew and stomped on.

You kept a steady pace, trying to keep your eyes fixed ahead rather than the surrounding shade.

You pulled your jacket tighter around yourself. It had been hours since the rain had dissipated, but night had come before the sun could warm the world again. A part of you minded the cold, but you were far more worried about your little sister.

You looked once more through the woods, hoping to see a flicker, even a small one, of movement. There were none. You started to call your little sister's name because if she was hiding out here like in one of the bushes, maybe she'd hear you and come running out, green leaves stuck in her hair and she'd be safe in your arms. That was just wishful thinking, though.

The trees were serene, quiet but for the winds whispering through them. An owl hooted somewhere from the darkness and fluttered into silent flight. You slowed your pace, incredibly aware of the crunch of dead leaves and twigs beneath your feet. You were on high alert, your eyes darting from tree to tree and the shadows in between.

The woods stretched on seemingly forever, like there was no end to the narrow path in front of you or the choices you could venture off to. It was getting difficult to keep track of where you came from and where to go from here. God, maybe this wasn't such a good idea coming out at this time of night by yourself.

Coming to a stop, you placed your hands on your hips, slowly turned around in a circle a couple times, gaze wandering over the massive expanse of trees surrounding you and nodded. Yup, you were one hundred percent lost. You did not recognize anything around you. Not that there really was anything that stood out as being recognizable but the fact remained, you couldn't place where you were. And since you didn't know where you were, you had no idea where to go. You pushed strands of your hair away from your forehead, letting out a frustrated sigh through your nose as you took another look around. Getting lost was not going to help Lily.

There was no landmarks or really anything to indicate where you were. Far as you knew, you were stranded in the middle of nowhere. Nervously biting your lip, fighting down the beginning stirrings of panic, you wondered if you should turn around and attempt to go back the way you came. That seemed like a good option since continuing to go forward would only put more distance between you and your house. Nodding again, you quickly decided that would be what you'd try. Turning around, you took one step forward and came to the immediate realization that you didn't know what way you had come from. During your pirouettes, you had completely lost sense of your bearings.

You stared up at the canopy of the big trees for a moment then uttered under your breath, "Fuck."

You weren't going to panic. You would not allow yourself to panic. If you panicked, you would end up doing something stupid. There had been more than enough stupidity from you today. No, you would need to tackle this like a battlefield. Utterly calm, composed, and thinking through everything carefully. Taking a deep breath, you held it for a couple seconds then let it out very slowly. You didn't feel any better afterwards but you could, at least, think a bit more clearly. First, you needed to figure out which way you had come from. There had to be some kind of indication anywhere that you would be able to recognize.

Looking around you with a careful, scrutinizing gaze, you quickly discovered that there was absolutely nothing that told you anything. There was no certain spot or area that looked any differently from anywhere else. In fact, you couldn't remember having seen anything that stood out. Just trees and trees and more trees. If there had been a stream or even a pile of rocks, that would have been something but all you could remember was passing by trees.

Okay, now the panic was beginning to get a lot stronger. Shaking it off, you scrubbed your face hard with the palms of your hands. You came to the conclusion that the best option would be to just choose a direction and start walking. It wasn't a good option but better than just standing around, slowly being overwhelmed by trepidation. Unfortunately, you were just going to have to hope for the best. You shuddered at the mere thought of leaving your fate up to just chance

but as of right now, there was no other option left to you. Taking another breath, you spun around in a slow circle then picked a direction at random.

Didn't look any better or worse than anywhere else so might as well. You still hesitated for a few moments, really not wanting to go that way or really any way unless you had some kind of concrete proof that you were going the right way, which now you weren't even sure if there was a right or wrong way anymore. Scratching your cheeks, internally berating yourself for being stupid enough to get yourself lost, you sighed, straightened your shoulders and took a step forward. Did not feel good, did not feel good at all. You took a couple more steps, feeling apprehensive of your choice with every moment, when suddenly, a familiar voice called out.

"There you are!"

Letting out a startled yelp, you whirled around to find Tyler, standing right behind you.

The sight of him did nothing to relieve the tension from your body, and after the encounter in your bedroom, you didn't know if it was really your Tyler, or not.

"Didn't I tell you to leave me alone?! God, Tyler, can you not take a hint?!" you yelled, pushing him away with both hands. "You were following me this whole time?!"

"Kind of, yeah. I was really worried about you, and you're out here by yourself, in the woods, in the dark, that's just asking for trouble, it's a recipe for disaster and you know that," Tyler said in his defense, but you weren't having it.

"I need to do this, okay? I need to! With or without anybody's help," you snapped. "So please, just stop following me!"

"Hey, can you just hear me out and stop pushing me away for one second?" Tyler asked, desperation in his tone.

You placed a hand on your hip and looked at him with a glare. "What? What is it?"

"I heard you talking to yourself, well it was more like you were screaming," Tyler started.

"Don't worry about it. It's none of your concern, alright?" you said, turning away because it was difficult to look him in the eye now.

"What got you so riled up? Did something happen?" Tyler persisted. "You know, just because we're broken up, doesn't mean I don't care about you. You can still talk to me."

"It's not important, okay? So stop pestering me about it!" you yelled at him and continued on your way in the woods, but Tyler followed you, much to your dismay.

"You were really upset, it sounded like someone was terrorizing you," Tyler said as he walked next to you.

"You don't know the half of it," you mumbled under your breath.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tyler asked.

"It means I tried to talk to you about this shit but you didn't listen, or you didn't care, or maybe it was both! I don't know, but I tried! I needed someone to talk to and you just made me feel like I was crazy," you yelled, throwing your hands up dramatically.

"What are you talking about? Of course I care! I'm just really concerned because I don't understand, so help me understand, let me in," Tyler pleaded.

"I don't want to talk about it, okay? So drop it! Please just drop it! That's all I'm asking of you," you said, your rage boiling over.

"You shouldn't be searching for Lily at this time of night especially by yourself. There's a lot of freaks that come out, lurking in the darkness. It's really not safe," Tyler said, attempting to reason with you.

"I can't sleep to save my life! I can't! And every moment that I'm not searching for her matters! I have to find her! If anything happens to her, I-"

"Nothing's gonna happen to Lily, I swear," Tyler cut you off, clasping a hand over your shoulder and looking back at you with earnest eyes. There was honesty and sincerity and love dancing behind those irises and you felt in your heart that it was real. This was your Tyler. That kind of emotion could not be faked. You were sure it was him, but hadn't you been sure it was your Tyler earlier? No, now wasn't the same to be having doubts. You had to believe it was him. It was him.

"I just can't let anything happen to her, she's supposed to be my responsibility, and if anything does, I've failed her," you said with a frown and continued wandering through the woods, avoiding his gaze. "She's been gone for too long. I'm scared that—I'm scared—"

"She's going to come home because we are going to find her. Together," Tyler reassured, cutting you off.

You nodded your head.

You two delved further into the woods, walking side by side. You didn't dare bring up the incident in the bedroom, you couldn't bear Tyler looking at you like you were crazy, not again. If you were being honest with yourself, you were starting to believe that maybe there was some truth to that. Maybe you were going crazy, but you weren't about to admit that to anyone.

"You know, any time you head out to look for Lily, all you gotta do is ask me and I'll join you," Tyler offered with a smile.

"Thanks, I appreciate that, but I can handle this on my own," you answered.

"You say that, but another pair of eyes couldn't hurt, right?" Tyler said, raising his brows.

You scoffed. "You're really fucking persistent."

"You need me to hang up flyers, spread the word around, go searching in the forest, whatever. I'm down for that, I just want to do my part and bring Lily home," Tyler said sincerely.

You sighed. "I'm sorry for blowing up on you. There's just too much going on and things have been so hard."

"I get it. You don't need to explain yourself to me, I understand," Tyler assured. "You're going through a lot and I want to make things easier for you."

"I know," you answered.

With Tyler's assistance, you two found a street and started walking under a streetlight. You glanced down at the cement beneath you and you spotted small muddy footprints that came from sneakers. The pattern of the footprints resembled Lily's sneakers.

"Hey, look. This – This looks like Lily's sneakers," you said, looking back at Tyler. You and Tyler walked over in a hurry, following the muddy footprints.

You looked ahead and the footprints led to a storm drain. You and Tyler rushed over, adrenaline pumping through your veins. You two knelt down near the storm drain and there you found torn up costumes stuck by the bars, there were capes clinging to them. You noticed the costumes looked vaguely familiar. Then you realized they were the costumes of the little boys who knocked on your door that fateful Halloween day.

The little boys who were dressed up as Batman, Superman, and Thor. Now their costumes were by the storm drain, like someone or something had dragged them down there. You could feel something twisting and turning in your gut.

You and Tyler exchanged somber looks.

7. The Hunt

Murky, smelly water rushed through the sewers, with the sounds echoing off the ancient brick walls spotted with patches of odd mold between the crevices. You were fairly certain the stench was penetrating your skin and seeping into your bloodstream. The tunnel was saturated with it, to the point that you felt as though the air should be putting up more resistance as you moved through it. The sounds of traffic from the street above faded as you delved further. Water at the bottom of the tunnel sloshed noisily against your boots, and you grimaced as the dampness seeped into your socks. With a soft click, your flashlight flickered to life, so you started to wave it in every direction.

When you first entered the marshy wasteland located in the Barrens, it had been truly overwhelming, sending you into a coughing fit, but as time had passed you accepted the permanent damage this place was doing to your nostrils and pushed your disgust aside, well as much as you could.

You and Tyler took yet another right only to be met with a dead end. You swore, turning around and re-entering the main pipeline. The maze of tunnels had grown more and more complicated as you proceeded. You weren't sure if there was a correct path anymore, let alone which one it was. Your shoes scraped against the ground as you walked down the tunnel, kicking up gravel and water as you went. You refused to be daunted and continued down the path even as the shadows around you distorted, making the tunnel seem wider. Almost endless. There was so much to survey; the long stretches of unchanging wall, as well as the relentless blackness ahead, was unnerving.

"She was here. She must have been," you said, your nose wrinkling in disgust.

"We'll keep looking, it's going to be okay," Tyler said, his nose scrunching up.

It was dizzying, retracing your steps over and over again, only to make no progress. Frustration grew as you went on with your search,

and after a while there was still no sign of Lily. You suppressed the urge to sigh, not wanting to breathe more of the air than was strictly necessary, and continued to wander.

It wasn't long before you realized that some of your lightheadedness probably sprung from the fact that you resisted taking full breaths for nearly fifteen minutes now. You felt suffocated, and leaned against the wall to rest for a moment. The barely-lighted tunnel before you was split into four directions, each one equally indistinct. You peered down each one hopelessly with Tyler, your breathing still shallow.

You bit your lip nervously as you rounded a corner, and once again found nothing. No sign. The batteries in your flashlight were running low, and the light faltered as you explored the tunnel. The dusty air kept catching in your throat, making your lungs itch. Your eyes watered and stung from coughing.

Absolutely nothing of note had happened since you dropped into the sewer. The only thing you discovered so far was a large quantity of cobwebs. You continued to worry the flesh between your teeth, and moved forward. There were rats often darting out from practically under your feet, barely avoiding being stepped on.

Dust wasn't the only thing present in the air. It was almost humid, presumably because of the many puddles of stagnant water coating the ground, and the mugginess clung to you like a second skin. You wiped a hand over your brow to catch a droplet of sweat rolling down your face. You already shed your jacket, tied the loose sleeves securely around your middle, but your entire body still felt weighed down. Sluggish and slow.

"It smells like shit in here," Tyler said, in his attempt to lighten the mood you assumed.

"Yeah, I'm well aware," you replied.

The narrow, leaking pipes that ran near the ceiling dripped steadily onto the path. You heard the falling droplets as beads against your head. There were multiple leaks, with rhythms that jarred each other and kept you off balance, prevented you from establishing equilibrium. The brick walls surrounding you amplified every sound,

so that even your breath seemed deafening. The fabric of your jacket dragged far too audibly against your skin when you moved to redirect the flashlight.

The tunnels were a veritable maze, twisting and turning, with passages leading off to one side or the other, the way ahead splitting in two, and your body tensed further with each passing moment.

You heard Tyler sigh, there was something on the tip of his tongue that you knew he wanted to say but wasn't allowing himself to because he knew you didn't want to hear it.

"Why don't you just say it? I know you're dying to!" you said, your voice bouncing off the walls.

"What? Say what?" Tyler asked.

"That there's nothing here! No sign of Lily. That we are just wasting our time!" you said, throwing up your hands. There was a scowl on your face, partially because you were annoyed with Tyler but mostly because of the delightful smell wafting up from the horrible sludge around your ankles.

"I didn't say that. You said that," Tyler corrected.

"Yeah, but I know what you were thinking," you accused.

"I wasn't thinking that," Tyler denied.

"Those were her sneakers, I know it was," you let out a frustrated sigh.

Tyler just looked at me with a sympathetic frown.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" you cried out, kicking your feet in the filthy, unsanitary water. "Motherfucker!"

"We can look somewhere else tomorrow, but I don't think she's here," Tyler said.

"I don't know what I was expecting. This is a wasteland for crying out loud. She wouldn't be wandering here. I just got my hopes up when I

saw her sneakers prints," you said, sinking your teeth in your lower lip.

"We won't stop until we find her," Tyler assured.

"But what if – what if she's-" you cut yourself off because you couldn't say that dreaded word. No, you refused to believe that could happen to someone as innocent and pure and good as Lily. "What if we don't find her?"

"We're going to. I know it. You can't think like that. We have to keep hope alive," Tyler said, a sad smile on his face. "Lily is like a little sister to me, too."

"Okay," you nodded your head. "Thank you."

"No problem," Tyler said.

You wrapped your arms around Tyler and pulled him in a hug. "I can't do this without you."

"I know," Tyler whispered. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Do you promise?" you asked.

"Promise," Tyler whispered. "Will you promise that you won't go wandering at night all by yourself? That you'll call me first?"

"You know I can't make that promise," you whispered. "Not while she's still out there."

"It's dangerous, I don't want you to get hurt," Tyler said with a frown.

"It's a little late for that," you replied.

"Hey, you know I'd drop anything for you, right?" Tyler asked suddenly.

"Yeah, I know," you murmured softly.

"You've always got me," Tyler said.

You pulled away and met his gaze. The amiable tone of his voice was

reflected in his brown eyes. Tyler cupped your cheek in his hand, caressing it with his gentle fingers. He was giving you that look again, it was something between adoration and desire. You breathed in deeply, taking in Tyler's familiar, comforting scent. You missed him.

Tyler leaned down to press a tender, warm kiss against your lips. You wrapped your arms loosely around his broad midsection, pressing close to his sturdy form. Letting your eyes fall closed, everything around you faded away, leaving behind only Tyler – his touch, his scent.

But then you got a flash of what happened in your bedroom, how it wasn't real, even though you thought it was. The last thing you wanted to do was pry your lips from his. Not when your kiss felt so natural, so easy. Like you just fit together perfectly, melting into one another. His hand shifted to the back of your head, pulling you closer like you two couldn't be close enough.

You broke away from the kiss, the horrible incident that occurred just hours prior still fresh in your mind, and you were sure it would be for a very, very long time.

"Tyler," you whispered his name, shaking your head with a frown.

"What? Did I do something wrong?" Tyler asked. He looked like a kicked puppy and you couldn't help but feel bad.

"No, you didn't. You didn't do anything wrong," you answered.

"Then what is it?"

"I just can't right now. I'm sorry," you said sadly.

"I understand. I'm sorry. I just got a little caught up in the moment," Tyler said, trying not to make a big deal of it even though it was a big deal to him, and you knew that.

"I missed us too, but now is not a good time. I just really can't right now," you said, not wanting to explain all the gory details.

"You don't have to explain," Tyler said with a sad smile. "I have

horrible timing. I mean, kissing you in a sewer. Yikes, how romantic of me. I can do better than that."

You giggled at his lame joke. "I'm sorry, today's been a really long day."

"You don't have to keep apologizing either," Tyler said. "Hey, do you want to stay at my place today? I can make you something to eat and we can come up with a plan for tomorrow."

"I appreciate that but I think I should be on my way. I don't want my mom to come back to an empty home," you said, you didn't want to decline his offer but at the same time you didn't think it was best to be around him right now.

"Okay, I'll drive you back home," Tyler replied.

You and Tyler turned a corner, and you were relieved to see a glimpse at the end of the corridor. It was illuminated by the entrance to the street above. You were done roaming the nauseating sewers and tomorrow would be another day of searching for Lily.

You stayed up to the late hours of the night, staring blankly at the TV screen in front of you. You were trying—fighting not to fall asleep. You couldn't take another nightmare. You didn't want to face him, again. Though, despite yourself your eyes were fluttering shut on and off until finally they stayed close.

When you opened your eyes, you saw a figure standing in the distance within the darkness. Though, all you could make out was its tall silhouette. You were in the woods again. You had followed his footsteps through the mud, a cool wind blowing your hair against your face.

Then you saw him, the clown. His hair whipped in the quickening wind like licks of golden flame. The expression on his face deranged, he was wearing a wicked and wide grin, his teeth glinting in the fading dusk.

A storm was heading your way, black clouds billowing toward you from the north. A fire burned dimly within the looming darkness,

bursts of red lightning dancing in your vision.

You called out to him amidst the sound of thunder, and he turned his head toward you as you approached. The same eerie smile reached his red, plump lips as he waved his gloved hand at you slowly.

The sky began to scream, the swirling blackness twisting through the atmosphere, choking the color from the sky like an infection sucking the life from its host. You could hear your name drifting from the eye of the storm, a low, resonant growl that echoed through your mind. Your legs felt as if they'd collapse as you ran toward the clown, your heart pounding in your ears as the void began to laugh.

As you were running, suddenly you tripped over a long strip of wire. You fell to the dirt beneath you, and you were quick to learn that it was littered with jagged shards. You lifted your head to the tremulous expanse above you, the sun never to touch your face again as it was swallowed forever. The sky had become as black as ink and the trees all around you started to fall to the ground. You knew you had to get away, flee before you were crushed, but then the clown was gone.

You could feel the tears welling, choking back a scream. The ground cut your hands as you struggled to your feet, an ominous chill creeping through your bones as the earth began to tremble. Amidst the lustful howl of the raging storm, the cries of a thousand crows tore through the air from the epicenter, their wings glittering like many black blades as they ripped through the air.

You felt something curl around your legs, barbed wire slicing through the fabric of your pants and twisting up your calves. You kicked at whatever had seized you, fighting to free yourself and yet you could not bear the thought of what you might see if you turned your head.

The grip around your legs only tightened, slithering further up your body as a hundred of tiny, curving blades pierced through your flesh. You cried out, coppery warmth spilling from your wounds. You could feel claws twisting in your hair. There was a crushing weight on your back, the sensation of dozens of pointed teeth against your neck. And despite the fear paralyzing you to the cold dirt, you had to see the face of your killer.

Slowly, you turned your head. The gnarled fingers in your hair relaxed their hold, sliding down your neck almost sensually before wrapping around your throat. The red glow of those eyes held you in place, every thought, every secret, he read them like an open book. You were barely aware of the tears rolling down your face, your anger overpowering your grief as you gazed into the abyss.

He smiled through many rows of teeth, and you could see him drooling from his mouth. His grip around your throat tightened.

"Rise and shine, poppet!"

The sudden snap of your neck tore you from the wastelands of the desolate woods and black skies, and you woke up with a panicked look. Your whole body trembled with horror and your eyes were filled with terror.

"It was just a dream," you told yourself repeatedly, hoping to relieve the feeling of fear and panic. It didn't help as your tears kept rolling down your face and your breath was starting to get faster.

You cradled your arms around your knees and dropped your face into them. Your trembling had gotten worse and your soft cries turned into loud sobbing.

You looked back at the clock on your bedside table. It was only 6am. Only about an hour had passed since you dozed off. The sun was starting to rise. You had to get out of this bed.

You ran out of your room moments after you awoke and rushed to the living room. Once you sat upon the couch, you started staring at the wall vacantly in front of you for God knows how long, but as you did so you realized you didn't hear your Mom leave for work, so you figured she was still home.

You decided you should go check up on her. You knocked on your Mom's door.

There was no answer.

You knocked again.

"Come in, dear!" Mom cried out.

You opened the door and found that she was laying in bed, under a blanket. You noticed that her eyelids were heavy and she looked like she just woke up, which was strange because she was supposed to be at work over an hour ago.

"What are you still doing here, Mom?" you asked.

She sat up from the bed, pulling the blanket away from her body and there was a tired, sad smile on her face.

"I have a killer headache and I just couldn't seem to get out of bed, so I figured I'd just stay here," your mom replied. She looked like all her energy had been sucked out of her.

"I'm sorry, Mom," you said. You made your way over to the end of her bed, sitting down on it. Your eyes wandered to her bedside table and you noticed that there was a tall bottle of vodka on it. Not to mention it was mostly empty. "Mom, are you drinking?"

"I just had one drink, don't worry," Mom said, waving her hand and playing it off like it wasn't a big deal. It was a big deal, though. Your mom had a drinking problem before, now you wonder if it ever went away. You could smell the vodka on her breath, she was probably drinking all night yesterday and this morning.

"You have a hangover, don't you?" you asked, deciding not to beat around the bush.

Your mom coughed, a hand over her mouth as she shook her head. "Sweetie, I'm fine. Please don't worry about me. I've got everything under control."

"Mom," you started, not wanting to drop the subject just yet.

"I said enough, drop it," she said seriously, her tone leaving no room for discussion. "Now, tell me how you're doing, dear."

"I think you know the answer to that," you said bleakly. You did not want to press her further.

"I know, I know. I'm worried sick about her. My baby must be so scared. This world is too cruel," she said with a frown on her face.

You didn't know what to say so you just listened and remained silent.

"We need to hang up more missing flyers and posters, maybe someone saw something or has heard something. We can't stop until we bring her home," Mom said, her voice full of conviction.

"Mom, I can do it," you told her, placing your hand on hers.

"I'm going to help you. I can get out of bed," she persisted, throwing the blanket off the rest of her body.

"No, just let me handle it, Mom. You should rest," you said, not backing down.

"Are you sure? I just feel useless staying in bed like this. I feel like I'm not doing enough," she said, though you knew she was in no shape to do just that.

"I'm sure. Leave it to me. I'm not giving up on her," you answered. "So you just rest."

"Okay, but please tell me you'll be careful and safe," she told you with a long face. She leaned in close and stroked your cheek with her hand.

"I will, Mom. I always am," you whispered.

"I know. I'm just reminding you. Ask Tyler if he can come with, I know you two have been getting close, again," she said, a hint of a smile forming on her face, trying to lighten the mood.

"No, I'll be fine on my own. Besides, he's at school anyway. I don't need anyone holding my hand, Mom," you replied, feeling like you couldn't stress that enough.

"He's a great guy that one, a keeper for sure," she commented.

"Mom, we're not dating anymore," you said, annoyance clear in your tone.

"You keep telling yourself that, but I'm your mother, I see things that maybe you don't," she answered in her motherly voice.

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you," you nodded your head.

You noticed that her eyes were becoming more heavy and she started rubbing her temples, she was trying to blink the tired away but it was in vain, it didn't show any signs of letting up with that hangover. She rested her head back on the pillow and laid down again. You pulled the blanket over her body, covering her up to the neck.

"I'm just going to rest my eyes for a moment, but I'll be up soon to fetch you something to eat. You must be starving and you're gonna need a meal before your big search today," she said, fighting off the yawn that threatened to pour out.

"I'll get something to eat later. You just focus on feeling better, okay? Just lay back and relax," you told her. You were adjusting the blanket on her body and by the time you glanced back at her face, her eyes had fallen shut.

You lingered by her bed, hoping that she was able to sleep peacefully today.

You head back to your room, sitting in front of the computer, and started printing out more flyers. Your plan was to tape them on every unoccupied space you could get your hands on. You wanted the whole town of Derry to know your little sister's name in hopes of even the slightest chance of someone being able to help bring her home. You were feeling optimistic for the first time in a while, it was like you knew you'd be able to find her if you didn't give up hope. You had to stay strong, not only for Lily and your mother, but for yourself, too. You couldn't let yourself fall apart, not again. You were determined to do everything in your power to make things right. You could take the mental anguish and the horror the clown made you endure any day of the week, so long as you had your whole family back together again.

Your printer made an abrupt, loud beeping noise and when you looked down at it, you realized that you ran out of paper. Heaving a sigh, you picked up all your missing flyers and placed them to the

side of your desk. You knew that your mom had some printing paper in her room somewhere so you went back there, entering very quietly so you wouldn't disturb her slumber.

Your mom was resting soundly, her lips parted and she was drooling on the side of her pillow. You walked over to her desk, pulling the drawer out noiselessly. You rummaged around, but you only found old bills that had already been paid for. You moved onto the next drawer and it was filled with stationery, and you were pleased to find exactly what you came here for; a full stack of printing paper. You pulled it out of the drawer, but then something else caught your eye. Underneath the stack of printing paper were several letters, the envelopes were opened so they had all been read before. You were curious, so before you knew it you were reading what was written on the envelope and who they were from.

The letters were coming from another town in Maine, and they were from your father; your estranged father. There was a new letter from this week and the week before and the week before that, some were sent overseas, which you knew he frequently visited with his girlfriend. Your heart thumped wildly in your chest and the air around you felt thick all of a sudden. You didn't know that your mom and dad were on speaking terms. Your mom never mentioned that. They've been divorced for years and things between them got very messy, they were fighting and bickering about everything and nothing all the time. It made you absolutely miserable. At first, you would visit your father on a weekly basis but then he got really busy with work, found himself a girlfriend, and then eventually he just didn't have the time for you, anymore, so that meant you were stuck with Mom, who was certainly a handful, to say the least.

You started to act without thinking and before you knew it, you pulled a paper out of the many envelopes and began reading away.

The letter read: "You can't keep my daughters away from me, you're going to hear from my lawyer. I have tried to talk sense into you but you don't listen to reason, so you leave me no choice. I've been trying to reach them, but I know you must have my number blocked because they haven't answered any of my calls. I've sent them letters too but no answer. You have no right to not let them see me. I know we haven't been a family in a long time but I am trying to make

things right. Please just give me a chance to prove it. I've made mistakes but it doesn't all fall on me. I want to be in my daughters' lives. Please don't ignore me anymore.

You pulled up the next letter and it was very similar to the one you just read, though this one sounded angrier and more demanding, your dad's patience was running thin and you learned that your mom had been ignoring the divorce lawyer as well. Then the next letter was about how your dad knew about your mom's drinking problem and that she needed serious help, he made sure to specify that she needed professional help. He also said that kind of behavior was unacceptable around her kids and that she was setting a horrible example for you and your sister.

Then as you continued reading, you heard your mom start to shift around on the bed. She was mumbling in her sleep, rolling on her other side. You felt a rock settle in the pit in your stomach and your breath caught in your throat, your heart skipping a beat.

You grabbed a handful of the letters and rushed out of the room, shutting your mom's door behind you silently. You walked back to your room, reading more of the letters as you blindly entered it. You closed the door and made your way back to your desk.

But then you felt a pair of eyes on you, watching you; lurking. You looked up and then you immediately dropped the letters to the ground. A broken gasp escaped your lips and you jumped back in your surprise. You froze up, completely still. Your eyes widened with horror, disbelief.

It's Lily. She was sitting on your bed, a eerie smile on her face.

She presses a finger to her lips, hushing you.

8. Tag You're It!

You couldn't believe your eyes. You didn't realize you had been holding your breath this whole time until you finally exhaled. It was surreal.

"Lily!" you gasped in surprise, your hand over your chest.

"Hi big sis!" Lily said with a wide yet eerie smile, her dark brown pigtails swinging as she bounced back on the bed.

"Oh my god, Lily. Where have you been all this time?" you asked aloud.

Your heart was beating so hard it hurt, your lungs shivered with each gasping breath, and your skin felt clammy with sweat.

"I've been away. I had to leave,," Lily said, twirling strands of her hair between her fingers.

"Is it really you?"

You were questioning reality, you couldn't help it. After what happened to Tyler, you didn't know what was real and what wasn't anymore. You wanted to believe she was really here, with everything in you—you wanted to believe.

"Of course it's really me! Your little sis! You don't recognize me?" Lily asked, tilting her head to the side innocently yet there was something sinister about it, something off.

"I-I don't understand. I've been looking for you for days, searching through every part of Derry, and now you just show up here? How? How is that possible? Why? Why did you leave?" you stammered, barely managing to get the words out.

"You just don't get it, do you? I had to go because Mommy's drinking again. You know how she gets when she drinks," Lily said, a grimace marring her young features.

"But Lily you can't just disappear. It's not going to get that bad again,

we won't let it. We can get through this, but you have to come home," you begged, your voice breaking. "I have been worried sick about you!"

"I can't," she said, turning away with a frown on her face. "She—She hurt me.

"What?" you questioned, raising your brows in confusion.

"Mom," she answered, looking away from you. "Mom hurt me."

"Oh god. What happened?" you asked, rushing over to her where she sat on the end of the bed.

"The night before I left, I caught her drinking. I told her to stop, that she was being unfair to me and you, but she kept on drinking. I tried to take the bottle away from her but then she scratched me," Lily recalled with a pained expression.

"Lily, please show me," you begged, crouching down in front of her.

"I'm scared. I'm really scared," Lily whispered, looking back at you with her big doe eyes that were brimming with tears.

"Where did she hit you?" you demanded.

"Right here," she raised her arm up, revealing wide, deep and long cuts that were covered with dried blood. The wounds stretched all the way to her elbow. They were slashes that looked like they were made by big, sharp claws. It looked like a monster had scratched her.

A monster.

"Mom—Mom couldn't have done that," you whispered in disbelief.

"What? Are you saying you don't believe me?" she asked, her voice breaking like she was about to burst into tears.

"Lily, it's not that I don't believe you, but it's just that it's not possible," you answered.

"Then you don't believe me!" Lily cried, jumping off from the bed.

She started to wail and then she barged out of your room in a haste.

"Lily wait! Don't go!" you called out to her, running out to chase her.

She rushed out of the house as quickly as her legs could carry her, sobbing loudly. You followed her outside but she was much too fast for you, she took off like lightning.

"Please Lily, let's talk about this!" you yelled out, venturing into the woods but she was already way ahead of you. Trees passed you in a flurry of whipping branches and the world around you tilted. It was a chilly autumn afternoon with slight overcast. Gentle winds rustled the deciduous trees, piling more dead leaves onto the already littered floor of colorful foliage.

Sweat was running down your face, it itched as it slipped down from your neck along the length of your back. You didn't waver, you didn't need a breather, you just needed to bring Lily back home. The air felt tight, hot and thick, every breath you took more of a struggle than the last until your lungs were burning and your throat ached with the effort.

"Lily, come back! Please!" you shouted.

The woods passed you in a haze. You were only truly aware of your feet against the ground and catching up to Lily. She was almost out of sight but then you saw that she took a shortcut somewhere, heading off in a small tight spot under a long branch that you hadn't notice before.

"Lily! Where are you going?!" you begged, your voice tearing straight from your throat. She didn't answer. As you followed her, you stumbled upon a rock on the road and nearly fell on your face. When you looked down, you saw the broken shards of glass on the ground like in your dream. The rock grazed your foot and you released a hiss through your gritted teeth, trying to calm yourself for a moment before you took off again.

But then finally, Lily came to a stop, in front of a large abandoned house.

It was a tall, imposing building with a cold, unwelcoming exterior.

Faded paint peeled from old walls beaten down with weather over the years, and there was a number of unsettling creaks and groans stirred up by the wind. It was worn down and falling apart.

With each step you took, a crunch of dry leaves resounded throughout the barren streets. You leaned forward onto the fence to observe the territory before you. In about a few yards, a decrepit house stood eerily among the unkempt lawn of wilting tall grass. You pulled your jacket around you tighter as the wind whistled and ruffled your disheveled hair. Nodding to yourself, you were going to do this. You scanned about the perimeter, searching for a way past the rotting fence.

Once you had located an opening on the side away from the street, you approached the house with hesitation. You had heard rumors from your peers that the place was haunted, thus no one dared to go near the house, leaving it to deteriorate from neglect.

One thing you had noticed while walking was that the grass farther away from the house was full of life; green and plentiful. But the closer you got, the more the grass looked dead, dry, and scarce. It was almost yellow in color. It filled you with a kind of dread that you couldn't quite understand, but you felt like you should push onward to the best of your ability.

A crow perched onto a nearby tree and squawked, causing you to flinch. The air smelled of rotten wood and like something had died.

Lily stood there, her eyes red and filled with tears.

"Lily, please don't go in there, please," you pleaded, but as soon as the words came out of your mouth she ran inside the abandoned building.

You held your breath, mentally steeling yourself for what was to come. You let the feeling of dread sink in and creep up the back of your neck, flicking up every hair as it went.

The windowpanes were too dirty and smudged to see through, but it

wouldn't have done any good anyways. There was only darkness for as far as you could see in. It crept into imaginary corners and spanned the whole field of view, almost like a curtain pulled over whatever it was trying to hide on the inside.

You took a step on the porch, testing the weight to be sure they wouldn't collapse beneath you before heading up and with every single one, the old floorboards creaked. It was overgrown with weeds, roots you nearly trip on before reaching the rotting front steps. You shook your head in attempt to clear your apprehension and proceeded toward the front door, which was left ajar, entering with caution. You noticed that there were a few faint red streaks stained on the door, and you knew almost instantly that it was blood. You swallowed hard. You were scared—terrified—of what you would see on the other side of the door. You could feel your heart in your throat as you took that first step inside.

The lobby of the home was dusty and smelled of mold, the air was stale. The wallpaper was peeling to reveal the cracked stone walls hidden beneath and cobwebs seemed to cover every corner. The charred furniture was swathed with cobwebs and a fine coating of dust covered the area. The floorboards creaked with every step taken upon them. Crooked picture frames lined the entrance way on either side, the beady eyes of the portraits seemed to follow your every moment as you made your way further into the house. The carpets were faded and had holes in them but looked like they had once been bright and colorful.

You entered through into what resembled a dining room. The elongated table stretched the length of most of the room while a broken chandelier dangled above the centre. Cutlery and place settings were positioned around the table, rotten food on the plates left abandoned by whoever had last inhabited this place. You walked through the dining hall and into the kitchen left in disarray by the previous residents. Shards of broken plants scattered the floor while the cupboard door had been thrown open. The refrigerator had no power and was emitting the smell of decay. There were no windows but a chill filled the air, the sounds of panic from the last guests seeming to echo faintly around the room.

A shiver ran down your spine as you moved back through the kitchen

and dining room into the corridor before heading into the living area where a long spiraled staircase ascended to the level above.

Only the windows at the base of the staircase provided light, but it was enough to guide you. You gulped before you speeded up the stairs, each step squeaked as it threatened to break under your weight. You frowned when something wet dropped through the crack in the ceiling above to land on your nose the moment you reached the top of the stairs.

You rubbed it dry with the back of your hand, cursing under your breath. The ceiling had a leak.

You exhaled after your sprint and looked to the top of the stairs, searching for any signs of Lily. However, she was nowhere to be seen, so you surmised you must have lagged behind too much. As there were broken glass shards from the cracked pane, you ran up the stairs whilst keeping distance from it.

You turned your head left and right repeatedly, scanning your surroundings. You were in a dimly lit hallway with light coming in from only windows in the rooms that were left open. The mold on the walls and doors provided obvious signs of abandonment. You went off to search through the many doors that lined the corridor. Some led to empty studies, other to rusted bathrooms and dust filled storage closets, but most were bedrooms. Like the rest of the house they had been left an untidy mess. The beds were positioned at random around the rooms, with clothing, sheets and curtains strewed about carelessly over the floor and furniture.

You slowed your breathing to focus on any sounds of Lily. It was indistinct, but you could just barely make out the sound of her footsteps coming from the right in the hallway, which disappeared in mere seconds. Without a second thought, you ran toward the sound.

The room you entered looked like a study. Bookshelves lined against the walls and center of the room. Dust particles fluttered among the amber rays of sunlight. You coughed into your sleeve and approached one of the shelves. Although arranged in neat rows, the books were covered with soot and dust; with the bindings falling apart, the books appeared to be deteriorating. However, you had not long to dabble

with your curiosity as the familiar sound of Lily's footsteps brought you back to reality. You darted toward the other side of the room and found Lily standing near the wall.

"Lily! Let's leave this place now, we shouldn't be in here."

You sighed in relief, hoping that she had calmed down now. However, as you came closer to Lily, she ran away once again. Wasting no time, you chased after her. You grimaced and cried out to her. As you exited the study, you caught a glimpse of Lily entering a room on the far end of the hallway. You didn't hesitate and only continued your pursuit.

The next room was—by comparison to the other parts of the house—darker as one of the curtains covered up the view of the setting sun. Although far advanced into the day, pulling the shades away allowed light to illuminate the dark room into an orange hue. You pressed your hand against the wall for a moment to catch your breath; your heart pounded rapidly, and your breathing was ragged from exhaustion.

You searched through every nook and cranny in the room but you didn't find her. You must have went to the wrong room. You cursed under your breath and returned to the halls, calling out her name and your voice resonated back to you.

The hallway was empty. With the lights flickering, you made your way down the corridor in your frantic search. You listened for any sounds from the other rooms that might alert you on the other side of the thin walls but you heard nothing. You frowned at the silence that greeted you and there was a stillness in the air that felt like all life around you was non-existent. You walked further down the hall away from the doors leading to the other seemingly vacant rooms.

You froze when you felt the chilling sensation of someone watching you. Turning slow, you nearly cried out when you caught sight of the dark figure standing at the other end of the hall. The silhouette was unmoving, partially hidden by the edge of the wall that seemed to mold into the black outline of its body. The figure faded as the lights brightened but always reappeared with each flicker that turned the hall to a tunnel of shadows. You felt the air around you suddenly

grow cold.

The ceiling lights burned out completely and you were left standing in the middle of the corridor as you waited for your eyes to adjust to the darkness. You willed your feet to move, never turning your back to the figure standing, watching you. You practically threw yourself at the wall marking the end of the hallway, your hands rummaging blindly for a light switch. When you finally found it, you flicked it upwards. To your dismay the lights remained off.

You played around with the switch for a bit while your alarmed gaze continuously moved to that of the still being standing on the opposite end of the hallway. Their body now appeared closer than they had a moment ago, you noted with a hint of fear creeping into the back of your mind. You knew it was probably your imagination playing tricks on you, fooling you into seeing something that wasn't really there, but you were in no mood to take any chances. Spinning on your heel, you reached to the staircase and hurried down to the lower level. You didn't stop or even slow until you had reached the entrance to the downstairs bathroom.

You walked across the tiled floor over to the sink, hating the way your footsteps seemed to echo even as you moved as quietly as you could. You turned the tap on and after a slight delay, you felt the icy water gush over your hands, cupping some of the liquid in your palms and bringing it up to your face to splash yourself with. You were sweating, all over. Taking a few seconds to collect yourself, you stood grasping the edge of the sink in your hands. A startled cry escaped your lips before you could prevent it when you caught sight of a faceless figure standing right behind you in the mirror's reflection. You whipped around, your heart pounding in your chest, but found that you were alone.

Your eyes darted around the bathroom for any signs of another being. Upon seeing there was none, you scolded yourself for letting your fear get the better of you. You were just seeing things, yeah that was it. This place was really starting to drive you mad.

You left the bathroom, and walked out into the spacious corridors connecting the downstairs rooms. You were certain you caught a glimpse of a little girl's dress disappear behind the corner ahead of

you. You stopped where you were as a hundred different thoughts swarmed your mind at once. There was one that sounded clearest though, one that spurred you to move past whatever fear you were feeling. With hands clenched tight and eyebrows furrowed determinedly, you went after where you had seen it vanish. You weren't going to let her get away this time.

You kept as quiet as you could while you crept through the darkness, staying alert for anything that might jump out at you. You entered another room, the outside sunlight was pouring through the window frame, illuminating the room with a faint glow. The light streamed out over the carpet like white hands stretching out for anything within its reach. There was noise from somewhere outside of the room, the sound of metal on metal, some sort of mechanism clicking to life. You tensed. Silence filled the room again, but you knew something was wrong.

You searched the area for another's presence. Seeing there was no one but yourself and about to take a step forward into the room to continue your search. You looked ahead of you and you found that there were three doors in front of you. Oh god, no.

But then you felt something touch your shoulder from behind and immediately, you flinched.

You twisted around reflectively, but there was nothing. You could have sworn that you felt something. You swallowed a thick gulp, holding your breath.

When you turned to look back at the three doors in front of you, there was something written on every single door with bloodied, bold letters.

The first door read: Not scary at all, the middle one said: Scary, and the last door was: Very Scary.

That wasn't there before.

You stepped back, a sharp gasp escaping from your lips.

What if Lily is in one of them?

You were gonna have to enter every single one, weren't you?

But it didn't matter, whatever it took to bring her back home.

You had to see. You weren't leaving without her.

Without thinking about it for another second, you entered the 'Not scary at all' door, not looking back.

When you entered the room, it was pitch black. You blinked, casting your head around, this way and that way, but everywhere you turned was just another dark wall plastered to your retina. Your fingers caught against your temple, like you were trying to rip a blindfold away, but there was nothing. The door slammed shut behind you and it made you flinch. There was a wide absence, like something's blocked, and once you've managed to shakily get to your feet and put your hands out, you touched a wall, cold to the touch.

You ran your hand over the dry, dusty walls and find that if you put both your arms out, you could touch both sides. How small was this room? You couldn't see anything, and you couldn't tell which way was out. There was no way to tell how deep you were, besides deep enough that there was no light, no breeze, not a hint of any other world than the one around you. Even though it was only a thought, you imagined the ceiling above you, straining, threatening to press down. You wouldn't have a moment's warning before you were crushed. But you were quick to realize that it wasn't just a thought.

You were claustrophobic.

Oh no.

This can't be happening.

No, no, no, no, no, no.

You searched for the door that you entered from, but you couldn't find it. It was nowhere to be found, like it wasn't ever there in the first place.

After some unknowable length of time — One minute? One hour? The dark had stolen your senses — the slope of the walls started to

change. They pressed in a little more with every step you took until your elbows were bent at your sides, your hands flat up against the walls.

The walls seemed to be shuddering closed all around you and you turned and bolted blindly in the other direction. Your heartbeat thudded in your hot ears, blotting out the sound of your footsteps and the ringing, deafening silence. The air was too dense to breathe, murky and dead and sick in your lungs, but you sucked in ragged, shaky mouthfuls and tried not to gag on the lifeless taste.

The worst part about it was the way that even your breathing echoed, every small sound you made ricocheting off every corner a million times over. The most minuscule hitch of breath became a scream, a whimper despite your best efforts became a roar, and you swore your ears were bleeding, your eardrums rupturing, and at least it would be a mercy when it was over so you no longer had to hear it. Of course, it's never over. It never ends.

You started to believe that you were going to die here, you were sure of it, as your lungs expanded and deflated so furiously you were certain they would burst.

You reminded yourself, in the beginning, to stay calm, that panic wouldn't do you any good. It was a mantra in your head, then, *stay calm, stay calm, don't give in, stay calm*, but even that had spiraled upward and outward, as though contributing to your own mass in this too-small space until you didn't fit any longer. Trapped in the fetal position, unable to uncurl, to stretch your muscles, you felt smaller, more useless than you ever had under this cruel, slow torture.

The walls rushed past under your fingertips, the only sign you were moving at all, the only way you could feel the space widening. Your eyes strained against the sheet of darkness, trying to pick out shapes, movement, light, but every shimmer was a ghost placed by your brain, so desperate for something to be there.

You realized with sudden clarity that the sides of the walls were narrowing, lowering, coming down and around on you. It was shrinking slowly and you knew it would compress you until you were

a tiny cube of smashed flesh and broken bones.

Then you felt something. There must have been a hole in the wall somewhere because you could hear something coming out, it sounded like a bug. No, it was bugs. Plural. You were quick to discover they were spiders once they started to crawl up your legs. It started with one, then another, then another, and another, creeping and wriggling all around your body, your hot skin.

You didn't think it could get any worse, but it just did.

There was spiders. Spiders everywhere. Spiders seemed to cover every inch of your skin, some biting you while others just roamed around your body. You were about to throw up, your stomach was in knots, twisting and churning. You couldn't even smack them away.

A shudder of revolt and terror wracked your curled body from head to toe. Unlike a shiver from the cold or a chill of fear, it doesn't stop. You just kept shaking, trembling so hard you felt like you were going to vibrate your insides to a pulp, vibrate the air right of your lungs. Your lungs, you remembered those and took a gasping breath, realizing you hadn't been breathing. How long? Your exhale came out a sob. You tried to jerk your head up, to open your airway, and it was met only by the hard, unrelenting wall of the room's interior.

You screamed, which was a mistake, it echoed on you and magnified indefinitely, and it scared you. God, you were so scared, you were so paralyzed with fear. You were sure you would have a heart attack and die, that would be less painful, it would be a mercy. But there is no mercy here.

It happened so slowly that you didn't notice; black shifting to deep grey to a beckoning yellowish hue. Fresh air finally, mercifully found you, reached out to you and licked coolly at your hot skin. You chased it up and out of the room, swallowing greedy mouthfuls of air that the room hadn't digested. You fell to the ground, your body curled up as you panted heavily. The door was wide open. Someone must have opened it. You would have died if someone hadn't. You didn't know how much time you had left but you knew it wasn't long.

When you were finally able to muster the strength, you lifted your

head and look up ahead of you. You didn't see anyone. Though, you couldn't find yourself to care because all you could think about was how grateful you were to be out of there. It was a nightmare come to life. It felt like a taste of death, a taste of hell. You didn't know which one was worse.

You lied there on the ground for about several long minutes, regaining your breath and allowing your heartbeat to return to a somewhat regular heartbeat. You had to look at the other rooms. Lily could have been in one of them. You had to find her. You weren't going to give up on her and just leave. This was a terrifying place and you had to get to her before she experienced any of the horrors you did.

You staggered to your feet, nearly swaying to the floor, but you had to get back up. You walked over to the door in the middle, placing a shaky hand on the knob before you opened it. You took a cautious step inside and swallowed a thick gulp.

The door slammed shut behind you, once again.

The room was dark but there was a dim green light that shrouded the space and gave a eerie glow in the darkness.

A series of shivers ran down your spine as you looked around the room.

There were clown dolls everywhere—everywhere you turned there was a clown doll. They were wearing polka dotted goofy clown suits, they had vibrant colored hair, their skin was painted white, like ghosts. Some of the dolls wore twisted grins while others had a dead serious expression with soulless eyes, you didn't know which one freaked you out more.

You were quick to notice that whenever you turned your head, their eyes followed you like clockwork.

Then there was laughter; cackling, gleeful laughter that reverberated from all around the room. It sounded like a dozen voices laughing in distorted echoes, then a hundred, each and every one of them tearing at your mind until they turned into screams in your ears. Their

mouths weren't moving but you knew it was coming from them. You covered your ears, waiting for it to stop. You needed it to stop.

This was his doing. The clown. Pennywise. He was messing with your head. This was all connected to him.

Then all of sudden, there was silence. You didn't hear the sound of the clowns' mockery anymore.

You stared directly ahead and you discovered that there was what appeared to be a big piece of furniture covered by a large white sheet. You felt drawn to it, like you needed to know what was hidden underneath. You were curious, you couldn't help it.

You walked over, chewing on your lower lip nervously. You placed a hand on the dusty sheet, giving yourself a long moment before you lifted it up and tossed it to the side.

There was a black coffin underneath, a layer of dirt on top of it.

You inhaled, then exhaled. You weren't going to hesitate. You opened up the coffin with trembling hands and what you found inside made you step aback, your hand covering your mouth in horror.

It was a doll of you, bugs scattering all around it. You stared back at the doll's lifeless eyes and the parts of flesh chewed off on her face, the lips were stitched together, frowning.

There was a missing flyer attached at the top of the coffin door. You pulled the piece of paper off and saw that it was you. The flyer said that you had gone missing on October 31st. You trembled all over, your face scrunching up in disgust. Your hands were shaking so much that you dropped the paper.

You released a heavy breath before closing the coffin, unable to stomach it any longer.

You were about to walk away—run away and take your leave, but it was too late.

The second you had shut the coffin, Pennywise rose from the box, like he had been inside of it the whole time. He sat down atop the

coffin, a hand propping him up. He gestured his finger toward you, motioning for you to come over.

"Peek-a-boo!" he taunted with a menacing grin.

You jumped back in shock.

He charged toward you with his arms stretched out, and with your flight or fight response kicking in, you scrambled to the door as fast as you could. You made it just in the nick of time, escaping from his clutches and slamming the door before he was able to reach you.

You ran forward, thinking you had a head start but you were dead wrong.

Immediately, you halted in your tracks.

Pennywise stood there, he was already outside, right in front of you. He started prancing toward you, his movements mocking you, fully knowing that he had the upper hand and there was absolutely nothing you could do about it.

When you tried running toward the opposite direction of him, his body swayed over, refusing to let you pass. You did this again and again, and his reaction was always the same, blocking the way out.

Eventually, you stumbled back and fell to your feet. You were over exerting yourself and your whole body hardly had the will to move anymore despite yourself. He towered over you and mocked you, filling you with dread. Your breath caught in your throat and you tried to crawl away but you only backed up against the middle Scary door.

He continued to saunter toward you and then when he was close enough he placed a long finger upon your nose.

"Time to float!" Pennywise said with a devilish grin, bending over as he stared at you with those malevolent, glowing eyes.

You crawled back and bumped your head against the door in the process, causing you to let out a strained yelp.

"W-What do you want? What do you want from me?" you asked meekly, looking up at him with terror in your eyes. You felt completely and utterly hopeless, like there was nothing you could possibly do to get out of this situation. Your heart was pounding so loud you could hear every single beat and it was deafening.

His eyes were flaring and he inched closer to your defenseless body. You were trapped. There was nowhere you could hide or run. You looked up at him with your mouth agape, tears clouding your vision. You made a move to escape but then he grabbed you.

Clawed fingers grasped your chin. They were hot, scorching hot, and the tips of his claws dug into your skin. He forced your head back as his eyes wandered seemingly over every part of your body, like you were under some sick examination. You didn't know what he was looking for or why, you just wanted it to be over. His other gloved hand wrapped around your throat, his hand burned with a biting coldness.

"Oh sweet little poppet, where do you think you're going?" he asked, his grin full of sharp teeth.

"Let me go, please," you croaked brokenly, barely able to get the words out. You shivered, then shivered again when his icy hand slipped down from your throat to dip into the hollow of your collarbone and curled around the neckline of your blouse as if he was about to rip it off and lay you bare. He leaned in and started sniffing the air around you, exhaling deeply.

"Ohhh but the fun has only just started. I have so many plans for you," he chuckled darkly, a trickle of drool dripping from his lips. It fell on your cheek and slid down to your jawline to your neck. You started squirming in his firm hold but it was in vain and only served to amuse him, making him laugh. You could feel his hot breath on your skin and it made you twitch involuntarily.

"Please..." you started, desperately trying to suck in air.

"You want me to let you go? What about Lily? What about your dear little sister?" Pennywise taunted. His hand tightened around your neck momentarily but then right when your face was becoming blue,

he loosened his grip and let you fall to the floor.

"What have you done to her?" you asked after a harsh coughing fit. The floor was cold and filthy and a series of shudders washed over you.

"Don't you need to find her? She's here. Lost, waiting for you," he started. He pressed his hand under his ear. "I think I can hear her now! She's calling your name," he said, his voice feigning concern.

"Where is she?" you demanded.

"Why don't I show you where she is? I know this place inside and out," he suggested with a twisted smile, stretching his arm out to you and offering to help you up.

"I don't believe you," you coughed the words out, an unforgiving glare on your face.

"You may not believe my words, but I know that you believe in me, poppet. Oh yes you do," he curled a claw under your chin, lifting it up and making you meet his gaze.

"What are you?" you asked, trying to avert your eyes but he made sure to keep your face where it was.

"Your worst fear. Your nightmare. And a clown! A dancing clown!" he announced in a sing-song voice.

"Why are you doing this to me? Please... Why? Why are you doing this?" you pleaded once more, choking on the air around you.

"You're a frail one; delicate. You're filled with fear, so so full of it. That's why I'm going to savor you, when it's your time. For now, I'll just have to save you for later. It's not time yet. But when it is, I'm going to feast on your flesh, every piece, every little drop. It's inevitable, poppet, no escaping it. Before then, just before the big day, you're going to be so paralyzed with fear you can hardly function, that you'll barely be mobile, and that's when I'll claim what's rightfully mine," he explained, trailing his claw up to your drool-stained cheek and giving it a slow and painful scratch.

You yelped out in sheer agony, your body trembling violently as a result. You turned your head, trying to look away from him but he kept you in place by grabbing your face in his big hand. You noticed there was something under the dusty sheet on the floor in the distance. The outline of the object resembled what appeared to be some kind of weapon, something sharp. You were determined to get it. You needed a something to attack him with. It was your only chance of getting out of here.

"That scent. Oh yes, that beautiful, sweet, perfect scent. I could eat you up this very second, oh, it's so difficult to restrain myself, but I must—I must. Not yet. I must be patient. I need you at your best. I need you at your most broken," he told you with a wicked full-tooth grin.

"I won't let you," you whispered brokenly, groaning from the pain of his claws digging into your skin. "I won't let you win."

"Try as you might, poppet, but it's beyond your control," he said, his eyes flaring and he shivered with delight at the sight of you squirming to get away from him. His hand slipped away from your face and you grunted under your breath. You started to crawl over to the sheet while he stood over you, chuckling darkly and menacingly. He was enjoying this. Every second of it. He loved your pain and misery.

You twisted around and rummaged with desperate hands until you were finally able to reach what was underneath the sheet. You wasted no time in grabbing it and you then realized that it was only a skinny tree branch. All hope was lost.

"Oh, you silly human, I could keep you around for a good laugh," Pennywise chuckled, a deep rumble in his chest. "You're a little weak in the knees and a little blue in the face, my, your conception of reality doesn't seem to be so clear, you poor feeble thing."

You stood to your feet and impulsively charged toward him, but when you did, he disappeared. He wasn't there anymore. You slowly turned around and found that he was behind you now. You charged toward him again with no plan on how you would attack him, but once again, he was behind you, in the opposite direction of where he

previously stood. He was messing with you. He was messing with your head.

"Tag you're it! Ooh, this could be a fun game!" he said in his overly cheerful sing-song voice.

You tried again and again, but it was all futile, and you could never reach him, or even come close.

"Stop! Stop! Just stop!" you screamed out, but devious laughter was your only response. You looked up at the ceiling and you noticed that it was narrowing, lowering, just like they had before. You turned to look at the walls and they were starting to close in on the room. Pennywise was nowhere in sight. You sucked in a harsh breath. You couldn't do this again. You couldn't. You had to get out of here now.

You ran out through the opened doorway and raced downstairs, taking off like a light. You could hear someone crying your name repeatedly, and it sounded like a little girl. It sounded like Lily. She sounded lost, confused, and scared as she called out your name. No, but you couldn't come back. It was too late.

You bolted and finally escaped from the clown. You were desperately trying to catch your breath and your head felt like a ton of bricks had fallen on it. Your chest was tight and your legs were burning intensely. Adrenaline and fear were powerful motivators but once you were outside, you started to stumble on your way away from the building. You could still faintly hear your little sister crying out for you. Your eyes were heavy and you couldn't see straight, everything was spinning and out of focus. You couldn't move. You couldn't walk another step. It was all taking a toll on you.

Before you could even fully register what just happened, everything faded to black and you passed out, collapsing on the ground.